

Fr. Konopa's Homily
Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion 2020
COVID-19: How Low Did Jesus Go?

Coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19. Safer at Home Order. Are you tired of hearing about it? Is the news getting you down?

- The scary statistics. Maybe you know someone who contracted it – or even died from it. It's no longer a statistic.
- The policies enacted. Schools closing. Hospitals and Nursing Homes allowing only one visitor at a time – or none at all. On March 12, the Cardinal who manages the Diocese of Rome in the name of Pope Francis, ordered all churches to be locked even for private prayer. The next morning, Pope Francis offered Mass and said that “drastic measures aren't always good,” and parish churches were re-opened. Normally, isolation is not good – even inhumane – but these are not normal times. What is the perfect policy?
- And angry opinions. Those who primarily see the world as a political battlefield of winners and losers are making accusations and posturing for future gains or future defense.

In the last 3 weeks, life has become much more challenging and difficult. Are you reaching a low point? ... especially since we don't know how long this will last? Are you feeling so low that you're wondering where God is to be found in all of this?

Let's look at Jesus and His low point to see if there's something to be learned for us.

In today's 2nd reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians, we learn that “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God. (Though He was God!!!...) did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness...” How much did He freely choose to empty Himself of His divinity? ...and not change His mind by grasping at His divine power when times got tough? Not only did He not turn stones into bread for Himself after fasting 40 days in the desert, St. Paul says He emptied Himself “even to death on a cross.” A very low point.

Let's back up. During His public ministry, Jesus spent a night in prayer and came back with a decision to ask 12 of His disciples to be His apostles – the inner circle. We heard in today's Gospel, one of these 12 drew a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane when the betrayer and Temple guards came to arrest Him. Jesus said No: “Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?” Jesus knew His 12 Apostles could be replaced by 12 legions of Angels: that's 72,000 angels!!! At this low point of betrayal and arrest, Jesus did not grasp at His Divine rights! So...no angels. ...“Then all the disciples left him and fled.” An emptying experience. A low point.

During Jesus' trial, Pontius Pilate found Him to be innocent, but Jesus was unjustly condemned to the most horrific capital punishment known in the Roman Empire. Before being sentenced to death, Pontius Pilate tried releasing him: “Now on the occasion of the feast the governor was accustomed to release to the crowd one prisoner whom they wished. And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas.” The Gospel of Luke said he was “thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder” (23:19). His name was Barabbas. In Aramaic, “bar” means “son of” and “Abbas” is a derivative of Abba – “Father.” Pilate asks, “Which one do you want me to release to you, Barabbas (‘Son of the Father’), or Jesus called Christ (‘the Messiah’)?” Jesus is the true Son of the Eternal, Heavenly Father, but He is not chosen by the people He came to save. Another emptying experience. Another low point.

On His way to Golgatha-Calvary, “they met a Cyrenian named Simon; this man they pressed into service to carry his cross.” Finally, some compassion! No? The punishment was death by crucifixion, not death by loss of blood and systemic shock on the roadside. The legionnaires needed Jesus to die on a cross, but they weren't going to personally help Him. They didn't select among a crowd of volunteers, but a “man they pressed into service.” Another emptying experience. Another low point.

So, here's a question: Why doesn't Jesus look to angels and use His divine rights? Because He came for humanity, not for angels. To live WITH humanity. To suffer with humanity. And to never abandon humanity... even when it meant to suffer at the hands of humanity.

How low did the Son of the Father go in freely emptying Himself? Hanging on the cross He said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The lowest point. It's a whole new understanding of inhumane isolation... and, dare I say, social distancing.

"Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God. (The true *Bar-Abbas* – "Son of the Father!!!...") did not regard equality with God (the Father) something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

At Christmas time, we remember that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us.

On Passion/Palm Sunday, we remember that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us.

Today, amidst the coronavirus pandemic, where is God to be found in all of this? God is with us.

Jesus could have chosen angels, but He chose us – you and me.

No matter how low we may be, Jesus is willing to go there to encounter us, to be with us, to love us, and to save us.