

Homily for April 8, 2020

Wednesday of Holy Week

In Dante's Epic poem, *The Divine Comedy* the first book is called The Inferno. Hell is depicted as nine concentric circles with Satan positioned in the 9th and lowest circle. Rather than hell represented by an eternal fire, Dante depicts hell as a frozen lake with Satan lodged in the lake, thus frozen in time. This is representative of two things; hell's static and lifeless character.

Satan stands in the icy lake, his torso rising above the surface. Gazing upward, Dante sees that Lucifer has three horrible faces, one looking straight ahead and the others looking back over his shoulders.

Each of Lucifer's mouths holds a sinner—the three greatest sinners of human history, all Traitors to a Benefactor. In the center mouth dangles Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. In the left and right mouths hang Brutus and Cassius, who murdered Julius Caesar in the Roman Senate. Brutus and Cassius appear with their heads out, but Judas is lodged headfirst; only his twitching legs protrude. The mouths chew their victims, constantly tearing the traitors to pieces but never killing them.

Dante's guide is the poet Virgil who explains to him:

***'That soul up there which has the greatest punishment' said the Master 'is Judas Iscariot, who has his head inside and plies his legs without. Of the other two who have their heads below, the one that hangs from the black muzzle is Brutus and the other Cassius, who looks so stalwart.'*¹**

Why in Dante's poem is the greatest punishment meted out to those who are betrayers? It is because betrayal is that which is most contrary and opposite to love. Therefore, the greatest betrayer of them all, is the one who with a kiss handed Jesus over to his enemies for 30 pieces of silver.

Dante understood the severity of the sin of betrayal because he would have known these words from today's Gospel:

The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. 24 The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

¹ Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy: Volume 1: Inferno: 001* (Kindle Locations 8078-8080). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

To betray the One who is Love Himself leads Dante to illustrate that for all of eternity Judas will be eaten but never consumed by Satan. To betray another is such a heinous sin, that without the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ, such a sin will consume the sinner for eternity.

Conversely those who are not consumed by betrayal but are choosing to consume the Lord Jesus Christ is the sacrament of his Body and Blood are ever more conformed into the character of the one who is love Himself. During this time of the Eucharistic Fast may the one who is not only the Bread of Life but the Word made flesh, feed you with his words.

What does such a person look like, who feed on the Word of God and the Bread of Life? He or she looks like the servant depicted in the Isaiah reading:

*Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,*

Here is the Lord Jesus Christ, who as a result Judas' betrayal had his back struck, and his face subjected to insult and spitting. This however did not deter him. Jesus epitomized in his Passion these words written centuries earlier:

*I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
he who vindicates me is near.*

Loyalty and trustworthiness and qualities essential to those who are being conformed to the One we consume at every Mass. For remember that if we do not consume the One who is Love, we will end up being consumed by the ravages of sin, characterized so vividly by Dante's depiction of hell's static and lifeless character where Judas is constantly eaten but never killed.

May we ask for the grace to grow daily in being those people who are known for our loyalty and faithfulness so that we might embody the Word of Jesus and His life giving presence by how we live today and everyday during this crisis.