

April 14, Passion Sunday C (Luke 22:14-23:56)

We recognize ourselves in those who accompany Jesus on that longest, hardest night.

by [Ron Adams](#) in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue

Read [the author's column for the Liturgy of the Palms](#).

Pity the disciples. The whirlwind has come upon them, and they are unable to see it for what it is. They remain a few steps behind Jesus throughout this longest and hardest week. By the time they catch up it's too late.

Foolish disciples. Jesus pours his heart out to them over dinner. In words and signs, he communicates that death is coming closer. His suffering is about to begin. He breaks the bread and shares the cup one last time with his beloved friends. He tells them that one among them will betray him. They fret a bit about which one that might be—and then immediately begin to argue about who among them will be called the greatest.

Clueless disciples. They miss the forest for the trees. Jesus patiently offers some remedial instruction regarding true greatness. He reminds them that he has demonstrated leadership through serving them. He gives them credit for staying by his side through everything. He tells them that they will one day sit on thrones in his kingdom.

Poor Peter. He is so quick to make promises of faithfulness unto death. Jesus tells Peter to strengthen his fellow disciples “once you have turned back,” and Peter misses this oblique reference to his coming denial. Then Jesus speaks clearly: “The cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.” How hard it is for Peter to be so fully known.

Confused disciples. Jesus reminds them that they are going into a frightening world. They must be prepared. In just a few hours they will become outlaws with him. One of them offers two swords, and Jesus says it is enough. This is an unclear response at best. Enough swords? Enough talking? Enough what? Jesus walks out before they

can ask.

Weary disciples. Here too we pity them. Called to prayer, they do their best. But it is late. It is dark. They are weary, confused, and afraid. Jesus is just out of sight, a stone's throw away. They try to pray, and they fall asleep. Jesus returns, his face lined with bloody tears, and awakens them. "Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." But it is already too late for that. The coming trial is now here.

Weak Judas. Does he believe what he is doing? Does it seem like a dream? He prepares to kiss Jesus. But Jesus stops him with an accusation of betrayal. Is it now that Judas sees the truth about Jesus? Is it in this moment that Judas sees himself? Is this when he loses hope?

Disarmed disciples. They have two swords, and one of them gets put to use. Swung wildly and amateurishly, it manages to cut off a slave's ear. Now Jesus speaks in that voice that once calmed the sea. "No more of this!" Jesus touches the slave and heals his ear. The sword is not welcome here.

Powerless disciples. Jesus challenges those who have brought swords and clubs to capture him. Who do they imagine him to be, a bandit? They do not answer. They take Jesus away to the house of the high priest. The disciples cannot stop what will happen next.

Weeping Peter. At first he keeps his promise, following as Jesus is led away. He arrives at the high priest's house and sits by the fire. Then the question is asked—three times. Peter says no each time. The cock crows, and Peter remembers. He leaves, and he weeps.

We know this story well. We can name the characters and recite their lines. We can anticipate what happens next. It's all so familiar. Yet the story has not lost its sting. It has not diminished in power or in its capacity to provoke and cause pain. We take comfort, and rightly, from what we know comes later. But here and now, on this Passion Sunday, we look and listen. We remember as if we are there.

In a way, we are. We contemporary disciples can recognize ourselves in those in the company of Jesus on that longest, hardest night. We recognize our own weakness, foolishness, cluelessness, failure, and denial. We recognize the disciples' deep desire to be faithful to Jesus, along with their frequent inability to know what that means.

We see ourselves in them.

That recognition is a gift, albeit a painful one. It assures us that Jesus does not expect perfection from his followers. Jesus takes us as we are, fumbling, failing, clumsy, well-intentioned, trying to get it right the next time. We recognize ourselves in his disciples, including dear Peter and Judas, because denial and betrayal are not unfamiliar to us. And in recognizing ourselves we see Jesus more clearly. That's the gift Luke offers: to see Jesus more clearly.

Jesus knows exactly what Judas will do. He knows exactly what Peter will do. Jesus is likely not surprised to return from prayer to find his companions sound asleep. Nor is he shocked when one of them tries to do battle with his captors. Whether because of his years of familiarity with them or through accessing some divine insight, Jesus knows exactly who is sharing that last meal with him—just as Jesus knows us in all of our humanity. And still he gives himself into the hands of God as he makes his way toward a cross for our sake.

What wondrous love is this, oh my soul? The hymn's question is ours as well. It is a love beyond measure, a love unmerited and freely given. It is the love of Jesus for his disciples, for us.