

Good Friday “Peter Follows Jesus” 2023
Bishop Frank Schuster

On this night of our Lord’s arrest, Peter followed Jesus. He had mixed emotions. His heart truly wanted to be with Jesus, his heart however also wanted to be a hundred miles away. Archbishop Fulton Sheen comments, “The two greatest dramas of life are the soul in pursuit of God and God in pursuit of the soul. The first has less apparent urgency, for the soul that pursues God can do it leisurely, as Peter followed the Saviour from afar. But when God pursues the soul, He proves a Relentless Lover, Who will never leave the soul alone until He has won it or been conclusively denied.” To illustrate this point, Archbishop Sheen employs Francis Thompson’s poem “The Hound of Heaven” that beautifully articulates no matter how hard we try to flee from God, God will hunt us down like a hound of heaven.*

Of course, the greatest thing that separates human beings from God is sin. Peter denied that he knew Jesus three times. Archbishop Sheen comments on this remarkable human capability. He writes, “Nothing except man can ever become less than its nature. A monkey cannot become less than a monkey; a cauliflower cannot become less than a cauliflower; an orange cannot become less than an orange; but a man can become less than a man, as he can become more than a man. He can become less than a man by acting like a beast. He can become more than a man by becoming a child of God. But although a man descends to the beast level, he never loses the Divine imprint on his soul, is never released from his craving for the infinite.”

Following Archbishop Sheen then, the crucifixion of Jesus demonstrates how far God is willing to go to save us. Twentieth Century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar commented that the self emptying of God in the incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ didn’t stop with His death on the cross. The Epistle of Peter and the Apostles Creed remind us that, from the cross, Jesus descended into hell itself to liberate captives. And yes, my friends, hell does exist, and Jesus went there tonight hoping to save us. What is hell? We touched on this on Palm Sunday when we reflected on the Passion according to Saint Matthew. Hell can be understood as the furthest limits of godforsakenness. Indeed, there is a passage in Deuteronomy that suggests that whoever dies on a tree should be considered the most accursed of all, yet another prophesy. The mystery we celebrate tonight is that Jesus would even go to furthest limits of God forsakenness to save us if that is where we are falling. Indeed, many icons of the crucifixion show the skull of Adam underneath the cross, reminding us of Jesus’ descent to catch us in our fall.

Tonight, the haunting question might be, do we really want it? Do we really want to be caught? Do we even care? Are we willing to turn away from sin, to refuse to be less than human, refuse to be merely human, and accept our vocation to be more than human, a child of God, grasped by the infinite so to be embraced by our good and gracious Lord? Do we really want this?

Just to underscore this, I was reflecting this morning about how so many of our senior priests are grieving right now because they are unable to celebrate the Triduum in a parish community this year. Indeed, we have parishioners who are homebound or hospitalized who feel the same way. However, I believe the greatest impoverishment are in the hearts of so many in our world who are just like “meh”, who don’t feel, and don’t desire Jesus tonight. Jesus thirsts for us on the cross. How many thirst for him? Do we thirst for him?

Consumed by love for us, the Lord embraces His cross for the salvation of the world. Peter follows along, but only at a distance, with a conflicted heart. Peter in this moment of course represents most of us at times. We may find Jesus intriguing. We may even have the courage to follow him a little bit, but when the chips are down and our faith is challenged, how quickly we can deny that we are even Christian, at home, at work, at school, at the voting booth. Peter’s real conversion happens only after the resurrection.

It is comforting to me that Jesus makes Peter our first pope and gives him the keys to the Kingdom. Peter was so much like us throughout his life. After the resurrection, Peter rises above his nature, becomes more than a human being, a child of God, and yes, even a saint. So can we!

And so, what is the cross we are carrying in our life right now? Take a moment and think about it. What is the cross that we are carrying in our life right now? Perhaps you are working a job you do not enjoy. Perhaps you are out of work looking for any job but can’t find one. Perhaps you struggle with physical pain or mental infirmity or addiction. What is your cross? Perhaps you are in a troubled marriage? Perhaps you are a single parent? Maybe you are alone, trying to find meaning in life. What is your cross? Think about it. After our intercessions tonight, you will have the opportunity to come forward and embrace the wood of the cross. No matter what our cross is, tonight, Jesus, the hound of heaven, wants to help you carry your cross. The real question, however, is will we let him? Will we let him help us carry our cross? Do we care? For this reason, the spiritual path we walk tonight is a dangerous climb. Our destination, however, is in fact not the wood of the cross. It is an empty tomb, the resurrection, and our salvation.

*“Lift up your Heart: a Guide to Spiritual Peace”, Fulton Sheen