

On St. Patrick's Day I often think about William and Rara Haney, my great-great-great grandparents. They were born in County Cork. But like so many others in Ireland in the 1840's, when faced with starvation in the Potato Famine, they emigrated to America and settled in Pittsburgh. And there, a few years later, the first James Haney, my great-great grandfather, was born.

In Philadelphia at Penn's landing there is a remarkable sculpture commemorating the Potato Famine and the Irish Immigrants who came to Pennsylvania. The bronze sculpture is huge—12 feet by 12 feet by 30 feet. That's basically the first four rows of pews and a height that would touch the chandeliers—it's a big sculpture. It contains 35 figures and several scenes. At one end is a stark landscape—starving people trying to dig for potatoes, with numerous gravestones in the background. In the middle, are refugees travelling by land with their possessions. It morphs into them standing on the deck of a ship. And at the far end, it shows them disembarking, coming down the gangway with excitement as they arrive in America.

As you look at such a large sculpture, it's difficult to take it all in. You walk around it. But at different vantage points you see very different things. Some things and some figures become visible and prominent. And other things are hidden, depending on your angle.

That's the way it is with the Passion accounts in the Gospels. There are many players, many things going on. And each of the Gospels offers a different angle, a different window on the Passion.

The 4 Gospels actually give us 3 basically different angles, 3 different portraits of Jesus Christ crucified. Matthew and Mark are so similar when it comes Jesus on the Cross that they really are more like one picture. And Luke gives us a different view. And John gives us a different angle still.

One Jesus. One cross. But three different viewpoints. Three different interpretations. And yet, each of the three different versions capture important and unique angles and aspects and meanings of what the cross is all about.

So I want to talk about each of them in turn.

As I said, Matthew and Mark have a very similar viewpoint, so I'll treat them as one angle.

Mark is the earliest Gospel, the first to be written. It's 10-15 years older than Matthew and Luke, and 20-25 years older than John.

Mark "paints" the first version of the Passion. And as I said, Matthew's "painting" of the Passion follows Mark so closely that they're almost the same picture.

Here's the Mark and Matthew portrait. It's characterized by several themes:

1. Jesus is abandoned by his disciples.
2. Jesus is God's suffering servant.

3. Jesus feels abandoned by God on the cross.
4. God vindicates Jesus, both at the moment of his death, and by raising him from the dead.

Just to tease each of these 4 themes out a little bit.

Theme 1. Jesus is abandoned by his disciples.

In Mark, Jesus' abandonment is almost total. Judas betrays him. Peter denies him. The other disciples flee in fear. One disciple flees so forcefully that he leaves his clothes behind when the soldiers try to grab him. Jesus had earlier called the disciples to leave everything behind to follow him. But they are leaving everything behind to abandon him. It's 180° out of synch.

After Jesus dies, Joseph of Arimathea does claim his body for burial. And the women witness it. But that's it. In Mark, Jesus goes through his Passion almost completely abandoned by his followers.

Theme 2. Jesus is God's suffering servant. The suffering servant image was seized upon by the early church and applied to Jesus. It comes from several sections in the book of the Prophet Isaiah. These Isaiah passages say things like these:

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."¹

"I gave my back to those who struck me... I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."²

"By a perversion of justice he was taken away... They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain, (to) make his life an offering for sin."³

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."⁴

And there are many more statements. The servant songs track Jesus' passion so closely that some fringe scholars claim that Mark's Passion is basically a fiction constructed from these texts from Isaiah.

The more mainstream view is that Jesus fulfilled these ancient prophecies in his passion.

¹ Isaiah 53:6

² Isaiah 50:6

³ Isaiah 53:8-10

⁴ Isaiah 53:7

But in Mark, Jesus speaks very little. Like a mute lamb he goes through his trials and to goes to his slaughter. If we just had the Mark and Matthew angle on the Passion, Jesus would be mostly like a twig being swept down a river. Jesus is swept along by the actions of others and is fairly passive.

Theme 3. Jesus feels abandoned by God on the cross.

In the Mark and Matthew "painting" Jesus says just one thing on the cross:

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁵

Yes, Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. Yes, Psalm 22 ends on a more hopeful note. But Mark is still showing us a Jesus who feels abandoned by God. The night before in the garden he said he was willing to do God's will and go through with the Passion. But in the midst of the pain and agony of crucifixion, Jesus cries out in abandonment.

Theme 4. God vindicates Jesus, both at the moment of his death, and by raising him from the dead.

Jesus may feel abandoned. But God has not abandoned him. At the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain of the Temple is torn in two. That curtain had divided God's presence from the people. But now, God rips through it. In Jesus' death, the divide between God and humanity is removed. Matthew adds that the earth itself shakes at this "earth-shaking" moment.

And the Roman centurion, the one who would have led the execution squad, makes a profession of faith. "Truly this man was God's Son!"⁶

And later by raising Jesus from death, God puts the final stamp of approval on his sacrifice.

It is God's will that Jesus dies. The divide is ripped in two. God's purpose and presence are made known in the cross, through the death of his suffering servant son. That's the essence of Mark and Matthew's Passions.

I'm going to skip over Luke for a minute and jump to John. John highlights very different themes in his Passion. In John, Jesus is definitely still the Lamb of God. But he's not a mute lamb. And he's not swept along by events. He is very much in control, verbally and spiritually all the way through.

In John there is no agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus doesn't ask to have the cup of suffering removed. The closest he comes to expressing something like that is on Palm Sunday in John. We heard these words in our Gospel lesson today:

⁵ Mark 15:34

⁶ Mark 15:39

Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."⁷

That's a key statement in John. Early in his ministry in chapter 3, later in chapter 8, and then during Holy Week in chapter 12, Jesus talks about being lifted up from the earth, pointing ahead to his crucifixion.⁸ That is his mission and purpose. And he is on track in moving forward in that mission. The cross is his destiny, and he embraces it fully.

And in his trials, Jesus retains the moral upper hand and engages in verbal sparring with the high priest and then with Pontius Pilate. Yes Jesus is under arrest, and is bound, and is carried from place to place. But he's not being swept along. Again, he is a man on a mission, he is headed to the cross, willingly and unerringly.

And whereas the other 3 Gospels talk about Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus with the cross, John skips over that. Nothing and no one comes between Jesus and his cross in John. John says point blank:

"So they took Jesus; and **carrying the cross by himself**, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha."⁹

And on the cross in John, Jesus never asks, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Instead he says 3 things.

1. He makes sure that his mother is taken care of by entrusting her to the care of his beloved disciple.¹⁰ Yes, most of the disciples have run away, but unlike Mark, some are with him at the cross.

2. Jesus says, in order to fulfill the scripture, "I am thirsty."¹¹

3. And at the end, Jesus says, "It is finished."¹² But "finished" is not strong enough. It's more like, 'It is accomplished' or even 'mission accomplished.'

And then John adds a statement that Jesus is in control, even of the end of his life. John says, "Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."¹³

In John, Jesus is on mission and on target and in control, even at the end. The cross is his destiny, and he embraces it fully.

⁷ John 12:27, 32

⁸ John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32

⁹ John 19:16-17

¹⁰ John 19:26-27

¹¹ John 19:28

¹² John 19:30

¹³ John 19:30

But then there's Luke. Luke was written between Mark and John. And there's some aspects of both. Jesus is a little more in control as compared to Mark, but not to the degree that he is in John.

But what's more important for Luke is that Jesus is continuing to be who he has been all through his ministry.

Luke always places special emphasis on Jesus as healer, and on Jesus as reaching across societal divides to serve the neglected and the marginalized. And in Luke, Jesus continues doing those on the way to the cross, and even on the cross.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, at the moment of Jesus' arrest, in all 4 Gospels Peter whips out a sword and severs the ear of one of the High Priest's servants. But Luke adds the wonderful detail of Jesus, in the midst of being arrested, reaching out his hand, and healing the man's ear.

Later during the crucifixion procession, Luke tells us that Jesus will stop and talk to a group of women, a group normally on the margins of society. He tells them not to weep for him, but to weep for themselves and their children when Jerusalem will be destroyed in the future, and to weep for the suffering that will come with that.

Later, on the cross, Luke has two unique episodes. First is Jesus asking his Father to forgive those who are crucifying him. Jesus is trying to heal the breach between these people and God.

Second is the wonderfully poignant story of Jesus embracing yet another outcast, one of the criminals being crucified next to him. I talked about this so called Good Thief last week. Though his hands are nailed, the criminal reaches out to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And our crucified Lord with his arms wide open in love, says, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

And when he has done all that, he places himself in God's loving arms: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Jesus in Luke's Passion is not quit as gung-ho as he is in John's portrait. But he is still faithful to his mission, even to the end. And he is faithful to God and to God's love for the lost, the sinful, the sick, and the marginalized.

One of my favorite scripture scholars from the late 20th century is Fr. Raymond Brown. And he has some wonderful things to say about these 3 different portraits of Jesus' Passion. Before I close I want to give you an extended quote from Fr. Brown. He sums things up extremely eloquently.

He says,

"When these different passion narratives are read side-by-side, one should not be upset by the contrast or ask which view of Jesus is more correct: (Mark's) Jesus who plumbs the depths of abandonment only to be vindicated; (Luke's) Jesus who worries about others and gently dispenses forgiveness; or (John's) Jesus who reigns victoriously from the cross in control of all that happens...

Fr. Brown then makes this spiritual point:

"There are moments in the lives of Christians when they need desperately to cry out with (Mark and Matthew's) Jesus, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' and to find, as Jesus did, that despite human appearances God is listening and can reverse tragedy.

"At other moments, meaning in suffering may be linked to being able to say with (Luke's) Jesus, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,' and being able to entrust oneself confidently to God's hands.

"There are still other moments where with (John's) faith we must see that suffering and evil have no real power over God's Son or over those whom he enables to become God's children...

"It is important that some be able to see the head bowed in dejection, while others observe the arms outstretched in forgiveness, and still others perceive... (the) reigning king."¹⁴

Next week during Holy Week, I hope you will draw closer to our crucified Lord: suffering servant, loving savior, AND reigning king.

¹⁴ Raymond Brown, *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week*