

## PALM SUNDAY, Apr. 13, 2014, Year A

- Authors of novels and plays *are like God!* For one thing, they create persons. And then, they inhabit the persons they create with aspects of their own identity and character. Seen together, **the several persons to whom an author gives life tell us important things about their creator.** But no single one of them will fully express the author's own personality. Unless, of course, the author is writing an autobiography, where the main character is then directly identified with the writer.
- *History* is literally "*his story*," *God's* story for the world. In God's story for the world, all the persons he has created and to whom he has given life express and exemplify aspects of his identity and character. But only one person in the world's story is the autobiographical portrait of the author of Creation. He is the Son of Man who came to be called the Son of God.
- Painters do the same thing. Whether they represent things in the world in an identifiable way, or simply use fields of color to articulate thoughts and feelings, **painters express aspects of their own identity and character in their work.**
- Either way, whether in the novels and plays of a great writer, or in the paintings by an accomplished artist, we won't find a simple and exclusive identification of author or painter *with just one person* whom the artistic creator makes real for us. *More than one* face we can identify in a painting, and *more than one* character in a story, will express the identity, vision and temperament of the writer or artist.
- Even *Judas!* In aspects of his personality and vision, *but clearly not in his choices*, *even Judas* expresses something of the God in whose image and likeness he was created. This is *fair and appropriate* to say because, as we all must admit, our choices and actions don't always align with what we know and with what moral "conscience" tells us.
- One of my favorite paintings is one of the least remembered works by one of the most remembered of painters. Google the name Hieronymus Bosch and see what comes up! You'll find many examples of Bosch's garden of earthly delights and his vision of hell. But less quickly will you

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find Bosch's sensitive and beautiful painting of Jesus carrying his cross, through a crowd filled with characters like you and me.

- Bosch's vision of Jesus along the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem provides a thoughtful reference point for our Palm Sunday Gospel. And, it can help our journey through this week. Ask this question: *With which of the persons in his painting does Bosch identify?* Given what I have suggested, I hope you'll agree that Bosch saw himself *in more than one of them*.
- Let's start with the figure who is either the most likely or the least likely stand-in for the painter, the figure of Jesus. Bosch may have identified strongly with our Lord and his vocation, as he created this painting. He may have felt he'd been given a unique and significant vision to share with the world through his artistic gifts. Perhaps he had endured derisive comments by his contemporaries, and was unappreciated by his peers. *If so*, Bosch may have felt he'd been given a special vocation from God to convey to others a true vision of the world, even at the cost of pain to himself. This is not unknown in the experience of artists and writers.
- Now if this seems an unflattering reflection on the possibility that Bosch identified himself with the figure of Jesus in this painting, here's a more positive way of seeing it. In this painting, Bosch has succeeded in expressing something few other painters have come near to doing. He beautifully and compellingly expresses the peaceful heart of Jesus, content to accept and receive all our scorn and its resulting pain. Bosch has captured *the pure heart of Jesus*, the pure heart of which persons like Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Jonathan Daniels were given a glimpse, which shaped how they lived *as well as* how they died.
- There are, of course, *other* compelling figures in this painting - figures whose disposition as portrayed by the artist we should consider. Perhaps the two most notable ones we know from the Gospel are the two thieves who are crucified with Jesus. Can you tell which two faces in this crowd represent them? You will find them in the upper and lower right-hand corners of the painting. In the lower right, we see the proud and contemptuous thief, the one who is quoted by Luke as mimicking the crowd's taunting of Jesus. Bosch shows him turning in anger at his

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accusers. In the upper right may be the one Luke presents as the repentant thief, whose eyes are turned upwards in dread at what is coming to him. Both of them will soon die with Jesus, but one of them will receive new life through his willingness to admit his failings. In this painting, he is not yet at that point.

- With sustained attention to the composition of the painting you will notice a significant detail. The faces of *seventeen* people appear in the painting, not counting Jesus nor his image on Veronica's towel. **Seventeen people who are part of the crowd, and not one of them is looking at Jesus!** Not even the man with the orange hat in the left center of the painting. Though he is facing Jesus, his eyes are turned upward toward the man with whom he is apparently talking. **A crowd full of agitated people, with Jesus in the middle, and not one of them is focused on him.** In other words, all of them are focused on their own concerns and purposes. Though Jesus came into a world *so in need* of him, and into a city filled with human problems, the people around him are heedless to his significance for them. And yet, **for them, for those who are happy to push him to his death, he will carry his cross.**
- I *urge* you to do something today, especially if it is not usually your practice to do so. Think of it as an act of good stewardship. Please take this copy of Bosch's painting home with you, along with the Scripture insert containing our Gospel reading. And then during this week, consider the image of Jesus in the crowd, in relation to our Gospel. Reflect on which persons in the crowd best represent you. And then, think about Jesus as God's autobiographical self-portrait for the world. Taking some time in the coming days, prayerfully to consider these ideas, will transform your Holy Week.
- Ask yourself: **How often do we hold Jesus in the same way Bosch portrays Jesus holding his cross?** How often are our eyes focused on *other* people, and on other things, rather than on him? How often do we let pettiness, anger, jealousy and boredom take center stage in our attention, rather than the peaceful heart of Jesus? It helps to remember that, **no matter what, he holds on to us just like he holds that cross.**



Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1515