

20th Sunday of the Year (C cycle) 2025

The Lord has not only shown us how to deal with good times; our crucified God also taught us how to face the worst of times. Once every three years on Palm Sunday, we read St. Luke's version of the Passion. Because of its length, preachers rarely preach it. That's unfortunate because it contains the best lessons on how to deal with hard times, even the worst of times.

After the Last Supper, Jesus led his disciples to the Mount of Olives. Recall the Passion takes place during the Passover. Visitors would have crammed Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. Jesus and his disciples may have set up a campsite on the Mount of Olives, their home away from home. The disciples thought they could relax; so they fell asleep.

Jesus does not rest or sleep. He prays. Luke calls the moment an agony. In ancient Greek, an *agony* means an intense preparation for an athletic event, a contest, a trial, a test. Like athletes even to this day, they went deep inside themselves to marshal all their energy, their complete, undivided attention. Today we would say to get the adrenaline flowing. The point is Jesus saw the worst of times as a contest, a trial that he had to face. The forces of evil had gathered. They had whipped themselves into a violent frenzy. How would Jesus react? Would he keep the faith? That's the trial—whether Jesus would meet violence with peace.

I wish we had kept the Greek meaning of the word *agony*, or invented a new term. We don't have a similar word for the intense preparation for a contest that tests us to our very core. Islam does have such a word. It is *jihad*. Our press and our government have misled us about that term. The Koran says there is a *lessor jihad* and

a *greater jihad*. The *lessor jihad* is a religious war. Mohammad carefully defined when to engage in a religious war; it is much like a *just war* in the Christian tradition. A *greater jihad* is an internal struggle, the soul-searching about one's dedication to the faith, whether a person could do more, could do better—could keep the faith in the tough times. I wish Christians had kept the term *agony* to communicate the internal struggle to live the faith, especially when times are out of whack.

That's what Jesus was praying for. Would he live his own teaching in the face of violent evil? He prays: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me." Who would not want to avoid the abuse and violence Jesus was facing? But, then, he adds the finest prayer ever prayed: "Still, not my will but yours be done." Jesus won the contest at that point. His preparation was finished when he determined not to engage in evil. Instead, he would maintain the divine values of peace, mercy, and love.

A bit later, while hanging on the cross, Jesus prays again. Hear his prayer: "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." He held to God's mercy even while being tortured. Violence met forgiveness that day. Hate met love. The battle was over. And, then, Jesus did more: he offered salvation to the repentant thief. Again, he showed mercy in the midst of intense suffering. So, when Jesus reached his last moment, he could pray: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." He found perfect satisfaction in God's hands.

The Gospel we read today casts the great trial in social terms. In the first century Israel, they did not think in individual terms as we do. They thought in terms of their people, their family, the community, a collective. Our trials can become social because we are all now glued to devices that send bad news to us each moment of each day.

For instance, I am deeply saddened that our politics have become so ugly that they divide our families and friendships.

Still, our most intense struggles are within, in our own hearts and souls. Living the faith, holding on to our values is mostly an intense internal contest. If you have an *agony*, an intense trial over living the faith in hard times, I invite you to pray as Jesus did. There is nothing at all wrong with praying that you never undergo the test or the trial. If the test is on the horizon, pray that the cup is taken from you—as Jesus did. But when people actually challenge your faith, when evil has gathered its forces—when deceit and lies challenge truth, when hatred and prejudice abuse peoples, when people propagate divisions, when violence seems unavoidable, when people tell us to compromise our principles—in short, when your faith is tested, pray as Jesus did: “Father, not my will but yours be done.” You may find perfect satisfaction resting in the hands of God.