

Text: John 18:12-27

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” (v.17) Peter had been warned. After Our Lord had instituted His Holy Supper, He led His disciples out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and to await His arrest. The disciples didn't know that, of course. They had been to Gethsemane before when they visited Jerusalem, so to the disciples it was nothing new. Yes, Jesus wanted to pray in private, but He asked them to keep watch with Him while He prayed. They couldn't manage even that. Twice they fell asleep, leaving Jesus alone with His distress. His fear was real, because He was really human. By virtue of His divine nature, He knew what would soon take place. By virtue of His human nature, He was rightly scared of it. He was scared of the coming agony. It would be more horrible than any person had ever endured, because the Father Himself would withdraw from His Son, leaving Him utterly alone not just to face physical torment, but also spiritual torment. So He prayed fervently that, if it be possible, that the cup He was to drink – the cup of salvation which necessitated His death – pass from Him. And yet, He didn't back down. He committed Himself to His Father's will and when the guards arrived, He was calm and prepared for what He knew had to happen.

Contrast this with Peter's behavior. He was warned by Jesus that he would deny Him three times before dawn, but Peter shrugged it off. *Surely, not, Lord! Why, I will even die with you!* When the guards came into the garden and moved to arrest Jesus, Peter did act bravely...or foolishly, depending on your point of view. He did at least try to make a stand for Jesus, as misguided as it was, cutting the ear off of one of the guards with his sword. But our Lord rebuked him and allowed the guards to bind Him. Then the disciples lost heart and fled. They didn't want to be arrested with Jesus because they didn't want to die with Jesus. Of the eleven, nine disappeared, not to be seen again until it was all over. But two of them screwed up their courage and trailed behind the group at a distance: Peter and John.

John had connections and knew the right people, so he was able to pass into the courtyard past the guards as they took Jesus to the High Priest. Peter, however had no such luck. He was a nobody, so he was forced to wait outside with the guards and the various people coming and going in the night. And being alone, he grew afraid. He overheard the things the guards were saying about Jesus and His disciples. About how they had made enemies with the wrong people, about how Jesus would pay for calling them all sinners and claiming to be the Son of God. Claiming to be the Messiah. But Peter figured he could just wait quietly in the dark, not drawing attention to himself. If he could play along, no one would be the wiser. No one would know that He was a follower of Jesus. And then the servant girl

spotted him, illuminated by orange light of the fire and asked the question that Peter most feared. **“You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.”** (v.17)

Later on, someone else grew suspicious of him. In Matthew we are told that it was because of his Galilean accent. **“So they said to him, ‘You also are not one of his disciples, are you?’ He denied it and said, “I am not.”** (v.25) You would think that the second time Peter denied His Lord, it would have triggered a mental alarm. If it did, he didn’t hear it. Then one of the high priest’s servants who was in the garden for the arrest, a relative of Malchus whose ear Peter had cut off, said **“Did I not see you in the garden with him?”** And the fear welled up in Peter and he did the one thing he had told Jesus – just hours before – that he would never do: He denied Him a third time. And the rooster crowed. St. Matthew records, **“And he went away and wept bitterly.”** (Mt 26:75)

The story of Peter’s denial is especially relevant to us today. Christians are being pressed on all sides by an increasingly hostile society. In the past year Christians have been blamed *in advance* for spreading COVID, so worship services were shut down or severely restricted. Christian colleges are being called out as extremist, hate-mongering institutions because they teach Christian doctrine, and there are calls by some to punish them, by restricting sports activities in the NCAA or restricting federal student aid to those who attend such colleges. Gone are the days, just 20 years ago, when the cry was “You Christians can live however you want, just let us do what we want.” Tolerance, it seems, is no longer in fashion. Now the cry of the Left is to prevent Christians from teaching our historic faith, because it is seen as hateful and backward for daring to call certain things “sins”. The time is coming, indeed, is here already, when you will be asked the same question that Peter was asked, the same question that provoked such fear in him: **‘You also are not one of his disciples, are you?’**

I am here to tell you that things will not improve. The time of testing is at hand, when the admirers of Jesus will be separated from the followers of Jesus. The world will hate you, because it hated Jesus. The devil will assault you, because he assaulted Jesus. You will lose friends and income and the glory that comes from man, because you speak His truth and care more about what God thinks than what society thinks. Because you are not ashamed of Christ and gladly bear His name before a hostile world. Persecution will come, because Jesus told us it would come. Our Lord taught His disciples, **“It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.”** (Matt 10:25)

Peter succumbed to his fear, and yet our Lord did not hold it against him. After His resurrection, Jesus went out of His way to reassure Peter that he was forgiven. Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him and three times Peter said yes. After each affirmative reply, Jesus said to Peter: **“Feed my lambs”, “Tend my sheep”, “Feed my sheep”.** (Jn 21:15-17) Three denials, three absolutions. Our Lord was telling Peter that He knew full well about his denials on the

night He was arrested. He knew and He forgave him. And not just Peter, but all the disciples who fled that night, they were forgiven for their weakness and welcomed back into Jesus' flock, the way a Good Shepherd brings back all who wander off in the stormy night. Peter would go on to be martyred for His Lord, crucified upside down, refusing to submit again to the fear that once overwhelmed him. He had the forgiveness and love of God. What could man do to him?

Jesus went to the cross that night not to die for an abstract idea of humanity. He went to the cross to die for Peter, who would deny Him, for Matthew and Andrew, who would run away. For the guards who bound Him, the soldier who whipped Him, for the man who hammered the nails into His hands and feet. He didn't die for perfect people. He died for sinners. He died for the weak and fearful, for those who stumble and for those who persecute His Church. He died for those Governors who have tried to prevent churches from worshiping and for the health officials who slander worship services as the most dangerous places in America. He died for you. For your weakness, for your denials, for your fear. He stood before Pilate and did not defend Himself against slander. He stood before Pilate and did not plead for His life. Because He had someone who needed Him to be strong, to pick them up from the muck and mire, to wash them clean and say "I forgive you... even for denying me." He had to go to that cursed tree for you.

The trials will come and we will stand as firm as we can. Sometimes we will waver. Sometimes we will succumb. But we will never despair, because Jesus bore those weaknesses on the cross, too. We know that our redemption is not based upon our strength and fidelity, it is based on His, and that is the source of our comfort. Jesus is faithful, even unto death. Jesus is forgiving, unto eternal life.

In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.

Rev. Schopp