



## God's Wisdom on Trial

*This column is a revised version of a homily given in Bend and La Pine on 19 February.*

In the Gospel today Jesus turns the world upside down. Knowing as they did the command of Moses to “hate your enemy,” his disciples must have been jolted to hear their Good Teacher say to them, “love your enemies.” Instead of urging them to take “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” He commanded that they “offer no resistance to one who is evil.”

Like us, the disciples were heavily influenced by what St. Paul would soon call “the wisdom of this world,” which teaches us to hold onto grudges and to take revenge, not to forgive. This is “foolishness in the eyes of God” because it can never bring what everyone wants: peace of soul. God did not design the human heart to hold hatred and harmony together. One or the other has to go, and worldly wisdom makes room for hatred at the expense of peace.

In stark contrast, the wisdom of God on the lips of Jesus is foolishness to the world. What possible sense can it make to turn the other cheek, to hand over your cloak along with your tunic, to go the extra mile? Worldly wisdom has long derided such Christian meekness as nothing but

weakness pure and simple—the morality of slaves afraid to insist on their dignity and stand up for their rights, who surrender to the stronger in order to get by.

We have a test case for these clashing perspectives in the Folly of the Cross, where Jesus practiced what He preached. Unjustly condemned, He offered no resistance. Slapped in the face by the High Priest’s servant, He did not strike back. Pressed into service by the Romans, He walked uncomplainingly as far as they demanded. Nailed to His Cross, He prayed for His persecutors. Looking back on the Crucified One, we see not fear-filled cowardice, but overflowing courage. Death in disgrace discloses invincible dignity. Ignominious defeat on the Cross leads to lasting, irreversible victory in the Resurrection.

But the Passion has a significant cautionary lesson for us as well. Not for a moment did Jesus regard His unjust condemnation by Pilate as a just judgment, as a consequence merited by His behavior. The Lamb of Sacrifice knew full well that He did not deserve a Roman death sentence, yet He willingly endured its shame. To the evil that devoured Him He offered no resistance. But His silence in the face of His accusers powerfully asserted His disagreement with their judgment.

If you and I are to imitate Jesus by turning the other cheek or walking the extra mile, we must never accept as right the unjust

condemnation of one who “presses us into service,” slaps us in the face, or strips us of dignity. No. We must remember that a cruel, contemptuous judgment does not truly define who we are, even though, like Jesus before Pilate, we may be powerless to refute it.

In our hour of persecution Jesus breathes into us the supernatural strength of the Spirit to stand with Him and willingly imitate His example in the face of unjust oppression. If we follow Him into His Passion, we discover an unexpected opportunity for great spiritual growth: the challenge to master ourselves—to overcome our hatred, our resentment, our desire for vindication. “Stronger than the person who conquers the strongest fortresses,” says St. Ambrose, “is the person who conquers himself.”

The path through the Passion is the path of self-mastery that leads to freedom. “You will know the truth,” Jesus promises, “and the truth will set you free” —free to turn the other cheek, free to walk the extra mile.

“Whatever wrong someone does to you,” the wisdom of the world whispers, “do it back to him!” Heavenly wisdom advises us differently: “Whatever God has done for you, do the same for your neighbor. What you give away to him will come back to you as peace.”