Just moments ago we were walking together outside. Now I’d like us to walk through the lessons we’ve heard and read together.

They begin with Isaiah’s prayer to be given the tongue of a teacher, acquired through listening to God’s promptings. A teacher’s job, according to Isaiah, is to sustain the weary with a word. What a wonderful description of the teacher’s vocation—to give hope to those who are struggling. The psalm echoes that in the very first line: “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am in trouble.” And the psalmist speaks for all of us. Paul writes about Jesus’ humility, undergirding all of his actions and statements in the passion narrative.

The very first scene shows Jesus’ humility and compassion, when he tells his friends that he’s about to leave them. He says that it’s inevitable, implying that goodness always suffers at the hands of selfish persons who betray friends for their own greedy ends. Even as he says this, he reassures them, telling them that even though he will soon die and leave them, they can always have him with them and institutes what we know as the Holy Eucharist. He tells them that he will be with them in those humble elements of bread and wine, deliberately choosing commonplace commodities, I believe, in order to say that he is this near to them, as near as the elements of a simple meal.

He tells them about his impending betrayal, and they begin to wonder among themselves, understandably, who the betrayer could be. The conversation soon turns to murmured comments like, “Well, it certainly won’t be me!”

They did not all immediately think of Judas, regardless of how much he was to be vilified after the fact, with offhand comments about his having stolen from the common purse and so on. Sounds like 20/20 hindsight to me.

There is no evidence in this passage that anyone present seriously considered, “Could I be the one?” Much more about, “Well it might be . . . [fill in the blank with names of the other guy].”

More proof of the lack of introspection is that in the space of one sentence, the debate turned from “who is the worst” to “who is the best?”

It is notable, I think, that Jesus has just told them he’s about to be arrested, tried, and executed, and they’re off to one side arguing about who’s the top dog among the twelve.

No one seems to be asking, “How can this happen among us human beings, that one of us is about to turn this loving man, this embodiment of good, over to the corrupt powers that be?”

That’s what we happen when we humans start trying to determine how good or bad we are by comparing ourselves to those other people. We over look our own thoughts, feelings, desires—our own character—by the measure of our value by telling ourselves, “Well, I’m certainly better than that guy,” or, “Wow! She’s so much better than I am; I’m just awful!”

Talk about the opposite of “knowing how to sustain the weary with a word!” And, thank God, God apparently doesn’t judge us by comparing us according to our worldly status or achievements, or by ranking us in order by those means.

They—or some of them, or some of us, or, really, all of us, at some times—just can’t leave this competitive spirit alone.

Peter says it for everyone: “Well, the rest of these guys might falter, might even betray you, but I never will.”

And we know how that turns out.

Somebody’s jockeying for position, trying to be the best, or at least not the worst.

It’s not even limited to the twelve. Pilate senses that this is not the man to be sending to the chair (well, the cross). It’s reasonable to think that he doesn’t want to be the man who’s to be remembered for doing just that.

Yet he and Mary are the only people beside Jesus who are mentioned by name in the creeds.

Pilate would have done well to eavesdrop as Jesus spoke to his brawling, ear-amputating buddies, reminding them (in question form, like the good teacher he is) that when he sent them out without two nickels to rub together they were just fine. Their actual answer to “did you lack anything?” was, “No, not a thing.”

So Pilate would have done well to hear the message about trusting God rather than the good opinions of his bosses and constituents. I think that’s why this part of the passage is recorded for us here—to help us remember that as we go about making decisions in our own lives.

This whole middle part of Luke’s account of the passion can be seen as much as a story about Pilate as Jesus. It’s Pilate, trying to save his own skin, much less his reputation, trying to curry favor with everyone in his orbit. He finally gives up, gives in to the will of the crowd, pretending to them and mostly to himself that he can evade responsibility for his own actions.

The rest of the story seems to me to focus more intensely on Jesus’ humility and his concern for those involved in his conviction and execution on trumped-up charges. He does acknowledge his own pain and despair, but only momentarily.

He asks God to forgive his executioners. He prays for the criminals hanging on their own crosses beside him—at least the one who shows interest in the meaning of what’s taking place. He tells him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” In John’s version (which we’ll hear on Friday), he tells his mother and the beloved disciple that they will be mother and son to each other. His unfailing focus in his death as well as in his 33 years of life is unerringly on bringing comfort and God’s love to others, even as he seems them—sees us—in all our human frailty. + + +

+ + +