

BULLETIN – MARCH 29

Holy Week confessions. Here is our schedule for confessions during this Holy Week. We hope to have two priests available for most or all of the hours:

Mon., March 30	7-9 p.m.
Tues., March 31	3-5 p.m.
Wed., April 1	9-11 a.m.

The sacrament of penance holds a central place for us in our work of Lenten penance. Please don't neglect this marvelous source of forgiveness and help.

Welcome, Father Joseph! The new kid on the block is **Father Joseph Kahumburu Kiragu**. Father was born and raised in Kenya, studied in Rome, then was ordained in 1983 and worked in his home diocese in Kenya. He spent much time as a seminary professor. More recently, Father worked in the Archdiocese of New York at Most Holy Trinity parish in Mamaroneck in Westchester County. He earned a Ph.D. in religious studies at Fordham. He comes to us as the “new hire” by the Department of Veterans Affairs as chaplain at our local Grand Rapids Home for Veterans. In that post, he follows many years of service provided by our own native sons, the late Father Al Bernott (1982-95) and his brother Father Ernie (2003-15). The proximity of SS. Peter & Paul to the Home for Veterans was immediately attractive to Father Joseph, and he looks forward to spending his term of service in residence with us. Father will be covering Masses now and then on occasion to give rest and respite to the pastor's voice and the parishioners' ears.

Holy Week, 2015. Many authors have written about what they supposed was the background behind the events that constituted that first Holy Week in Jerusalem back during the time of Pontius Pilate. Since calendars and time were reckoned a bit differently than they are today (who, after all, besides Shakespeare enthusiasts, celebrated the Ides of March a couple of Sundays ago?), we are not absolutely certain even of the exact dates and years of Jesus' life and death. That is properly the penchant of modern Western historians, to get things exact and precise. “This is the very spot.” “At this exact moment, 100 years ago . . .” “George Washington slept here.” And so on. We in the Western hemisphere tend to be chroniclers and re-creators. Look at the thousands of people who invest great time and energy in recreating battles of the American Revolution and of the Civil War, making sure that every detail of every button on every uniform is exactly as it would have been 150 or 240 years ago.

Eastern historians, including those of the “Middle East,” are not nearly as obsessed by precision and exactness as we would think of them. They are more interested relating the story with its true *meaning* than they are in getting all the dates and times correct. It's why Jesus could teach in parables without being scorned as a “mere” storyteller, and without being interrupted by an annoying nitpicker with questions like, “When did this happen? What were the names of the Pharisee and the tax collector? How many guests were at the wedding banquet, and what was on the menu?” Can you

imagine someone accusing Jesus of being a liar because he told stories that were not “true”?

The Eastern brand of history strives for truth as does the Western brand. But truth is not *only* facts, and is not *only* meaning. Genuine history is the blend of both. Furthermore, the Gospels do not aim to be history or biography. They are *theologies*, which would not pass muster as pure history in the Western sense, but are quite acceptable in the East. However, even those theologies, even that Eastern brand of history which probes meanings, often stop short of musing about human motives. What *really* prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Our Lord? Was Pontius Pilate genuinely conflicted about Jesus, or was he just playing the Jewish elders for the shrewd fools he no doubt thought they were? And what about those Jewish elders, the high priest Caiaphas, his father-in-law Annas, the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and their scribes?

Let’s consider that last question. Why was it so important for the Jewish leaders to debunk anyone who came along claiming to be the Messiah? Some have thought that they considered it their duty to thoroughly grill any messianic claimant, and even put him to the ultimate test if necessary. They did this on the theory that if the claim was valid, God would protect his anointed one and save him from death. “Let’s see him come down off that cross, and then we’ll believe in him!!” (cf. Matthew 27:42, Mark 15:32). So there are those who believe that the elders were just doing their religious duty, the job they believed was entrusted to them by God.

Others think that because Jesus did not “fit the mold” of a religious leader or of the popular expectations of the Messiah, there was an automatic prejudice. He not only was not part of the “Good Ol’ Boys’ Club,” he actually took some rather pointed jabs at their lifestyle and lack of virtue. Certainly he embarrassed them when, one by one, they walked away after he invited any one of them without sin to cast the first stone at the adulterous woman (John 8). They couldn’t deny that he preached well, that he knew the Word of God backward and forward. They even tried clumsily to claim that he was possessed, and that he cast out devils by the power of the evil one. They attempted to trip him up in any way they could, and he always outwitted them. Well, you know, you *never* show up the boss, which is what they considered themselves. He was just “trouble,” and could be dealt with the same way they had dealt with all the other messianic pretenders.

Still others make the Jewish leaders consummate politicians who had learned to skillfully navigate the troublesome waters of a state of occupation. Lithuanians would understand this very well, having been in a similar situation from 1940 to 1991 in a hostile takeover and forced annexation into the Soviet Union. The Roman Empire brought a certain tense peace to the nations it conquered, but it was ruthless in reminding those nations just who held the power. Rebellions were crushed without mercy. It was the duty of the procurator to see that they never got started in the first place. Pilate and the Pharisees had a working relationship. Neither wanted to see that delicate balance upset. Pilate served at the pleasure of Caesar. The Jewish leaders had more complex motives: they had a sense of national pride, both for selfishly personal reasons and for what we would today call patriotic reasons. Exercising local power (and enjoying its privileges) was a way to ensure the preservation of the nation, and thereby the continuation of their power.

I have entertained the idea that perhaps there was a mixture of all of the above motives and reasons, but the primary reason the Jewish elders acted with such rage and

ferocity toward a genuinely just and pious man was that they were so much like us. I look at my own complacency, my own desire to maintain the status quo, my own reluctance to rock the boat, and I begin to see myself in the conniving going on to maintain things the way they are. God invites me to grow, and promises his grace to help me do it, and I so often say, “Thanks, but no thanks. I think I’ll just stay in my comfort zone.” What else would explain the religious leaders of a people whose religion centered around an expectation of God’s anointed one? Just as common as those somewhat-Christian alarmists in our own day who are always proclaiming the imminent second coming of Christ were those in the Jewish faith who were ever saying, “When the Messiah comes . . .” There was a lively sense of anticipation, and the Jewish leaders knew it. Only one problem. If it actually *happened*, if the Messiah actually *came*, they could be out of a job. (Kind of like, if racism were actually eradicated, what would Al Sharpton do for a living?) So there was a tacit agreement among the leaders that any claimant to the title of Messiah would be dealt with and done away with. Their lives and reputations depended on continuing the anticipation while ensuring that the anticipated event never actually took place. All this, of course, is only speculation about the motives of those Jewish leaders during that first Holy Week. The speculation is fueled by my recognition of my own sins and weaknesses and inclinations, and the grateful acknowledgment that Christ has indeed come to save me--and all of us--from those things which could consume us. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: “God loves each of us as though there were only one of us” (St. Augustine of Hippo, 354-430).