***The Passion History: Trial & Denial***

**Fear and greed are great motivators, so great that there is an often repeated saying that *“****financial markets are driven by two powerful emotions – fear and greed.”* In this evening’s gospel reading we hear about a person driven by fear and a person driven by greed. There is a third even greater force at play and that is love.

In the early hours of that Friday on the way to the garden of Gethsemane, Peter had pledged his undying loyalty to Jesus. Jesus had predicted that all his disciples would desert him before the sun rose, but Peter swore that even if all the others deserted Jesus, he would never desert him. Jesus said to Peter, *“I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me” (Matt 26:34 NLT). Peter insisted, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!”*

Peter did not yet know the power of fear.

Fear is one of the most powerful emotions. It plays a very important role, in keeping us safe in the face of danger. Fear is necessary for survival as it motivates us to protect ourselves either by running away or by defending ourselves. Often fear is a good thing but sometimes fear can make us compromise our beliefs and our principles. This is what fear did to Peter.

Peter believed in Jesus; he had already come to the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah. His faith in Jesus was so strong that he was determined to follow him even to the point of death.

Then along came fear, and Peter compromised his beliefs and his best intentions. He denied Jesus three times to the point of calling curses upon himself and swearing that he did not know him. As the rooster crowed a second time, Peter looked at Jesus and Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter. At that moment as their eyes met, Peter realised what he had done. Can you imagine how Peter felt at that moment? The guilt, the shame, the remorse, and the grief. Overcome, Peter goes outside and weeps bitterly.

Fear can make us compromise our beliefs and principles. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been silent when you should have spoken up? Have you ever gone along with the crowd even though you knew it was wrong? Have you ever stood by and watched someone being treated unfairly when you could have stood up for them? Fear is what enables bullies to keep on bullying, and Jesus was certainly being bullied.

The other great motivator is greed. Greed had motivated Judas. Judas was in charge of the disciple’s money and often stole from it. When Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume Judas had said, *“Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages*” (NIV 12:5). Was Judas really concerned about the plight of the poor? His real concern was not for the poor at all, but for the lost opportunity to get a hold of more money. When greed gets a hold of you, often other people and their needs take second place to your own desire for money and possessions.

We live at a time when we are constantly encouraged to be greedy. Many of us are living with more money and possessions than the vast majority of humanity, but the advertisers keep on telling us we need more. We need the latest model, the latest fashion, the newest gadget. We are continually encouraged to spend money on things we don’t really need. We are encouraged to look for our security in money and possessions rather than in the one place where all our security will finally be, our Lord Jesus.

Greed caused Judas to have a crisis of faith. Instead of sticking with Jesus and seeking security in him, Judas turned to money. He went to the chief priests to betray Jesus. In return, they gave him 30 pieces of silver. A day’s wage at the time was about one silver coin. It was enough to buy a small plot of land at the time. In the Old Testament 30 pieces of silver was the price you had to pay slave owner if you were responsible for the accidental death of one of their slaves. The 30 pieces of silver was blood money that would lead to Jesus’ death. Judas took the coins and then looked for an opportunity to hand Jesus over. And hand him over he did, finally betraying Jesus with a kiss.

Sometimes when we let sin get the better of us, we don’t realise the potential or consequences. Perhaps more accurately we choose to ignore the potential consequences. Only when we see the harm our sin has done do we begin to realise the gravity of our actions. We don’t know what Judas expected to happen to Jesus once he handed him over, but he seemed ignore the very real possibility that he was playing with Jesus’ life. Soon after Jesus was arrested, Judas realised that his actions had resulted in Jesus being condemned to death. Judas’ greed had led to his friend losing his life.

It is only when we see the damage our actions have caused, the painful consequences for those who are on the receiving end of our sinful actions that we become fully aware of the depth of our sin. As the damage we have done finally dawns on us we may find ourselves full of remorse. Judas saw the consequences of his greedy actions and was filled with remorse.

Unable to live with his remorse and guilt, Judas seeks to distance himself from his actions and returns the thirty silver coins to the chief priests as he confesses to them, *“I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood”* (Matt 27:4 NIV). Instead of showing compassion the chief priests heap coals on Judas’ guilt telling him, it’s not their problem and that he is responsible for his actions and their consequences. This is true but it also shows a complete lack of empathy and compassion on the part of the religious leaders.

Remorse is a powerful emotion that can lead you to the very depths of despair. The person he had betrayed was going to die. What can you do when you have done something so terrible to another human being? How can you go on living every day with the knowledge of what you have done and the feelings of regret and shame? The chief priests had shown him no compassion and most definitely did not offer him the possibility of forgiveness. Jesus was heading to death and Judas had no idea that the one he had betrayed would rise again. Judas had no idea that love would have the final victory. Seeing no hope of redemption Judas decided to hang himself.

If only Judas had waited until Easter day when Jesus came to his disciples. To the ones who had deserted him, the one who had called curses upon himself denying Jesus and said to them *“Peace be with you.”* If only Judas had heard those words of love, forgiveness, acceptance, and hope. Peter did and it changed his life forever. It enabled him to boldly preach about Christ to thousands on Pentecost day despite the dangers of doing so. It enabled him to endure imprisonment and persecution without letting fear overtake him.

In this time of Lent, we are encouraged to reflect on our lives and on the times when we have not been the people God has called us to be. As we do so we may be reminded of those times when we have let fear stop us from doing the right thing, or when we have hurt others by giving in to greed and other sinful desires. We may come to a realisation of the depth of our guilt and be filled with remorse. When we find ourselves full of remorse and sinking into despair let us remember that nothing we have done places us beyond redemption and that Jesus is always there ready to open his arms and say, “Peace be with you.”

Amen.

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