

**Pentecost 17B, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**Readings: Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38**

### **O Saving Victim! Beyond Shame**

#### **Introduction**

Rana and Emad are a couple who live in Tehran. They work in their respective professional lives, but their real passion is drama: they are part of a local drama group. Currently they are acting in the local presentation of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman". The story, as you have seen, unfolds around an assault upon Rana as she showers in the 'safety' of their apartment. She has left the front door a little ajar, expecting her husband Emad to enter, but instead a stranger does. In what follows, we see Rana's emotional collapse, Rana's emotional unravelling. Attached to the trauma of the assault itself, there also exists the sense of shame, the shame of the victim, who feels that perhaps she was unconsciously complicit in the attack because she trustingly left the front door open. Even worse, is her fear of what others may think: her shame is magnified as she wonders what her husband Emad may be thinking; magnified, as she rejects his suggestion that they go to report the incident to the police. Finally, she breaks down during the play. Rana's despair is registered even more deeply if we were to understand that Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman" is all about despair. In the scene, Emad plays Willy Loman, who in Miller's play, is a failed salesman. Willy cries out to Linda, his long-suffering wife, that he is nothing, he feels that he is nothing. The irony is that, it is Rana who is feeling that in the real here and now: not a failed salesman but a failed, shamed, woman. We finish the scene where she is left weeping unable to go on: so shamed no-one quite knows what to do, how to respond. She, she is alone.

Let us now move to the Gospel for today! We touch three points: Peter's confession as right and wrong; an inadequate interpretation of Jesus, and then a deeper, more complete view of Jesus' statement.

#### **Gospel**

First: the confession of Jesus as Messiah, as the Christ, stands as the mid-point of Mark's theology. Before this point, the disciples, as well as every-one else, are totally confused, completely 'in the dark' about Jesus' mission or identity. After the confession, there is a sense that they are closer to understanding Jesus, nearer to the mark; but they don't. Peter may be ahead of most of them, but even *his* confession, while being correct in form, is wrong in substance. He is technically correct but has no real idea about what Jesus' is getting at.

Second, Peter's take on Jesus is pretty standard and orthodox when it comes to the Jewish messianic expectation: namely that Jesus as Messiah is the victor, through whom Israel will become the victor of history. In short, Peter is nothing, if he is not a jingoistic Jewish - all in the name of Jehovah

Third, Jesus challenges that view; the view that God is *the victor*, identifying with the victorious. Indeed, Jesus turns not only the truth about God on its head, but also, he reads reality through the opposite lens: the experience of suffering and shame.

So, what is being said here? Two things I think! The first, is that God is *not* the one who we instinctively, intuitively think God is: One of “power and might” as even the Christian liturgy, in the Sanctus of the Eucharistic order, has it.

Second, in this statement of Jesus, where the meaning of Messiahship is turned utterly on its head, where the Messiah becomes the victim, there is also an unmasking, a revealing of what normally makes culture, society, and religions function: the interplay of power, dominance, and violence, where victims are invariably produced. In a few words, Jesus, “the victim Messiah” discredits much of what Peter stands for, what we stand for in our own daily lives, simply in the act of living, as we do deals with the devil: small and large.

### **What This Means**

The fact that we follow the victim Messiah carries extraordinary consequences for the way we see the world and ourselves in it. In Spanish Christian theology, there is a saying “that the hangman may not triumph over the victim” (“*que el verdugo no triunfe sobre la víctima*”) - in other words, that the usual way of the world may not prosper. In Christian Biblical theology, this is confirmed in the way in which Satan is otherwise known as the *Accuser*, the *Liar*, the *Victimizer*, but God is understood as the *Defender of the victim*. The never-ending Gospel prayer, is that there be no more victims, because Jesus Christ, God among us, has become *the Victim*.

O that Rana may find her life again! Beyond pain, beyond shame!