

“In Your Face!”

I must be watching too many basketball games. I can't get out of my mind, an often used phrase, by game announcers, sports writers and half-time show hosts. The phrase is **“In your face.”** Of course, it was introduced to us through basketball circles, first heard in urban neighborhood playgrounds, in the 1950's.

This expression **“In your face”** has a double connotation. The first one is a negative one, in which it means to be aggressive, violent, destructive, antagonistic, uncompromising, intimidating and offensive, to name a few. This is the meaning you will no doubt hear during a basketball game. The second connotation is a more positive one and the meaning of this phrase is challenging, provoking, stimulating, courageous, direct, gallant and heroic, to name a few.

The recently deceased William Safire, a columnist for the New York Times, wrote in his newspaper column titled “On Language,” that a film critic hailed actor Al Pacino for his “persuasive portrait of a pesky, in your face romantic. [good meaning]

News coverage of the recent health care debate could have made us more aware of the differences in political perspectives on the policies of the bill. Instead, by concentrating on the incivility and use of close-up camera angles that characterizes much of today's **“in your face”** reporting, audiences were made to react more emotionally and think of opposing views as less legitimate. [bad meaning].

Today's scriptural readings present Jesus, on center stage, showing the whole world his final moments on earth. And this stage is full of characters with contrasting **“in your face”** attitudes.

We begin with the crowd who lined up along the entrance street to welcome Jesus. This crowd knew that there was a price on Jesus' head, and he was a man, who stood up to all kinds of religious and political leaders. They believed that he was the answer to ancient prophecies, and that he would save them from the oppression and tyranny of others. The crowd was expressing their cheers of **“in your face”** desire for Jesus to be their warrior king, their conquering hero.

And here was Jesus, entering the city, full of **“in your face”** defiance and courage, riding on a colt, to fulfill the prophecy within the Book of Jeremiah, an unmistakable claim that he was the Messiah. Knowing that a price was on his head, Jesus was entering the city with sheer courage, making one last appeal, one last confrontation with the people of Judea to take him as their King of Love and Peace.

The greatest drama ever known continues.

The last meal together was planned and prepared and to be enjoyed in an upper room, a room that was typically used by a Rabbi and his favorite disciples, to talk things over with them and to open his heart to them. Jesus was full of **“in your face”** love, joy, and great anticipation for showing them how he was always going to be with them, body and spirit. Jesus was full of excitement that even when they forget how special this meal had been, for Jesus knew how easily the human mind forgets as time goes on, he was going to impart a special use of ancient symbols, covenants; and of everyday common necessities of bread and wine; with a new meaning – a meaning that one, who has eyes to see and a heart to understand, would remember Jesus and would remember this night.

Instead of receiving a response of gratitude and appreciation, Jesus receives an **“in your face”** awakening that among his most trusted followers, at this communion table, there was a traitor, a trusted disciple who once pledged himself to Jesus and who was now about to go out

and deny him and to seal this sin with a kiss. And if that hurt was not enough, Jesus was also confronted with the tragedy of his disciples quarreling about precedence and rights of honor, influenced by their own retained mental idea that Jesus was all about an earthly kingdom. Jesus told them bluntly that the place of honor is reserved for those who serve, for the person who will consent to serve more than anyone else, for the person who gives rather than gets. Instead of receiving a response of gratitude and appreciation, Jesus experienced shame, failure and disloyalty, from Peter, the passionate and devoted leader of his group. But it is Jesus' expressions of **"in your face"** understanding and forgiveness, that instills in Peter, the hope for people, who, though sinning, would still be haunted by goodness, a sympathy and perception that they might receive and that otherwise they would never had realized. It was this sympathy and perception that ultimately came upon Joseph of Arimathaea, who provided no arguable defense of an innocent man, at the trial with the Sanhedrin. It was this sympathy and perception that ultimately came upon Simon the Cyrenian, who probably expressed bitterness towards Jesus, for getting him involved in carrying the cross. It was through this sympathy and perception that, according to legend, turned both to faith and then to converted disciples of Christ.

The drama continues, as Jesus enters the Garden of Olives, with agony and anxiety. Maybe Jesus is beginning to feel hopeless to fight the cause; maybe he begins to feel that he is already defeated, based upon the trials of the evening so far; maybe he feels the frustration of hopeless submission, to the horrible thought that the dream that he envisioned can never come true. What he receives in return is his follower's **"in your face"** exhibition of indifference and lack of concern.

What we see next in this ongoing drama is Jesus' **"in your face"** emotions of love, trust, faith and total submission to a God, to his Father, whose everlasting arms were underneath him and around him and who would never let him go.

Because of his talk with the Father, Jesus was full of victory won and peace in his soul. Jesus was full of light that would serve him well when he suffered mockery, scourging and false accusations before the Sanhedrin, before Herod and before Pilate. It would serve Jesus well on the cross, through his expressions of pain, suffering, fear and abandonment, but also his exhibitions of clear mind and unclouded senses, as he offers forgiveness to his enemies, the promise of paradise to his new found friend, the good thief, and comfort and consolation to his Mother and to his Church.

By his death, Jesus tore open the veil that separated God from us and granted us the **"in your face"** eternal presence of his Father and Spirit.

This passion drama, summarized for us in today's Gospel, is certainly about an attitude – it is about God the Father's attitude to show his heart to us forever more. Jesus continues to make his journey to our hearts to make his "in your face" appeal: to take him as our King of Love and Peace. Happy are we, who have Jesus in our heart and in our face!