

A Sermon for Good Friday, April 14, 2006

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“Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted *me* in the day of his fierce anger” (Lamentations 1:12 KJV).

I had an interesting youth baseball discussion the other day. I coach a team and refused to agree to make up a rained out game on Good Friday—today—which, I said, ought to be as important as Easter. The opposing coach—an obvious stranger to the significance of the day—opined that my refusal rendered me unqualified to coach in the league. The commissioner voiced sympathy with the other coach. He said, “I am an elder at my church and we don’t have Good Friday.”

This struck because it gave me a fresh realization that for most people, including many Christians, today has no real significance. All churches will be packed for Easter, but Good Friday will attract fewer than an average Sunday in those churches that actually observe it in some way. Many churches will simply be empty. This is the reverse of the attendance at the original events. The crowd was present at the cross on Good Friday. But only a select few got to see Easter.

The under-emphasis on Good Friday is odd also because in all the gospels the Passion narratives are the centerpiece of the story. Each gospel devotes more space to the story of arrest, trial and crucifixion than to the accounts of resurrection. The climax of the gospel story is undoubtedly the words of Jesus today, “It is finished.” All that comes before, in John’s gospel, leads up to this. All that follows—specifically the Resurrection—is a consequence of what happened today.

In the epistles, the cross remains at the center. St. Paul writes, “God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14). And he tells us that the purpose of our central act of worship is “to show the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

To be sure, the cross is not about death for death’s sake. The cross leads to the resurrection, but resurrection is always preceded by the cross. They are two sides of one coin. To long for resurrection without facing the death that precedes it is to desire a paycheck without having worked, or to want to be in perfect shape without bothering to exercise. It is to want the end while ignoring the means to get there.

That is to say, the experience of Good Friday makes the experience of Easter real. Having seen the full consequence of sin: the agony, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the brutality of the soldiers, the malice of the crowd, the compromise of the politicians; having seen Jesus bear all this for us, Easter comes as the natural consequence of his work.

But if we skip this step, Easter seems unreal. If there is no agony and death from Jesus and no mourning and good confession from us, then there is only a Peter Pan sense that some great thing happened for no particular reason and with no particular connection to anything that is going on in our lives.

The Holy Week services, in which we experience again all the last events in the life of Jesus, are not particularly “fun” services. But they are services that those with a sacramental understanding feel drawn to attend. It is not that we say, “Boy I can’t wait for Good Friday to come.” It is rather that we know that we need to be here. It is that we know that this is the necessary, if uncomfortable, pathway to Easter.

Moreover, the Good News of the gospel is hidden in Good Friday every bit as much as it is proclaimed obviously on Easter. Good Friday is about injustice, hatred and jealousy. And it is about a chaotic sense that things are out of control as all conspire to crucify the Son of God. And, yet, St. John tells us, Jesus is sovereign; he is almighty even in the midst of chaos and pain.

This is the unique witness of John’s gospel. There is no hint of a pathetic, wimpy, victimized Jesus. Jesus is in control even as events seem out of control. When Judas came to the garden with the soldiers in what seems a clandestine and surprise visit, John tells us that Jesus “knowing all things that would come upon Him went forward and said to them, ‘Whom are you seeking.’” Then, as Jesus spoke the divine name, “I am” those who came to arrest him by force fell back to the ground.

Jesus accepted his arrest as the Father’s will, “Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given me?” Jesus did not defend himself against his accusers or beg or plead for mercy. He said, instead, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight”

When Pilate boasted of his power, Jesus said, “You could have not power at all against me unless it had been given you from above.”

Suffering on the cross, Jesus makes provisions for those he left behind (he has pity on them) creating a new mother-son relationship.

The utterance of the words, “I thirst” were not so much to express a need for drink; they were uttered, St. John tells us, “That the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

And, finally, life was not taken from Jesus. Rather, HE gave up his spirit. As the hymn says, “God is reigning from the tree.”

Our hymns today capture two aspect of the suffering. The *Stabat Mater* focuses on the human emotions of one who grieved over the cross. This is our sadness over the pain and injustice of it all. But our later hymns today, *Faithful Cross* and *The Royal Banners* both speak of triumph. The cross is where Jesus wins the victory. The cross is a symbol of glory.

The way that Jesus experienced the cross, the pain that the Father had planned for him, is a model for us in our pain. The pattern of Good Friday and Easter introduce a new theme to our life’s story. If the cross is the pathway to glory for Jesus, then our cross is the pathway to glory for us.

We live “in Christ.” In baptism we are made partakers of his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). We are called to pick up our cross daily and follow him. In union we Christ, we find triumph in the midst of *our* pain. We discover that our share of the cross is the means to our resurrection.

Consider the words of St. Paul in Romans 8:35f.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?.....Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This means that we, like Jesus, do not need to be afraid of the pain of life. It is not that we are anxious to face it. It is rather that we know that life for each one of us in this fallen world involves some measure of affliction, opposition, pain, disappointment, suffering and, for all of us, death. We know that Christ is with us in it and that he will use our pain to produce in us the fruit of new and resurrected life. We can pray to have particular aspects of our “cup” taken away, but we can also pray, “Nevertheless not my will but thy will be done” (Luke 22:42) knowing that in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Our sharing in the cross makes faith real. Faith is not a flight from the painful realities of life. Faith is triumphing with Christ in the midst of real life. A man once wrote, “All neurosis results from the attempt to avoid legitimate pain.” I can’t speak to complete accuracy of the statement, but it has some wisdom. One of the reasons Good Friday is culturally unpopular is that we want to flee from pain, even the necessary and unavoidable pain of life. We would like to get straight to Easter and we look for philosophies that will promise resurrection without the cross.

We can thank God that our practice of the faith doesn’t do that. It makes us face the reality of Good Friday so that it can give a real Easter.