

## **Sermon – Good Friday – Cathedral of the Incarnation**

### **John 18: 1 – 19:42**

In the name of the one who suffered and died on the cross.

To the world that is continuing its daily grind outside of this cathedral, this solemn day of remembrance would not cause any emotional or physical pause whatsoever. What must people think, if indeed they are thinking about us at all, as we gather to remember the arrest, torture, crucifixion and burial of a man nearly 20 centuries ago?

For many, religious days are just an inconvenience whilst for others they may be a blessing. I know I felt relief on the main non-Christian religious holidays in NYC because alternative side street parking was suspended and I didn't have to move my car. Even for many Christians, today is just another workday, easily passed over in favor of Easter Sunday when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord.

Some Christian denominations also gloss over the utter wretchedness of this day seeing it as a blip in the Triduum. There is a general feeling sometimes that we shouldn't stay in the death of Jesus rather we should focus our attention on the triumph of the resurrection. However, without the wretchedness of that Friday so many years ago we would not have the resurrection to celebrate. Good Friday or Mourning Friday, as the Germans refer to this day, is a critical bridge between Jesus final loving act, where he shared bread and wine, his body and blood with his disciples, and his ultimate defeat of death.

The passion narratives help to orient us to the time when Jesus offered himself up to the Jewish and Roman authorities knowing that the outcome would not be at all good for him. If we listen carefully and meditate on the words we can visualize the scenes as described and enter the walk of Jesus from Jerusalem. First he crossed the Kidron Valley to the garden of Gethsemane. We can stand with him as he becomes distressed and agitated and then deeply grieved. Watch as he falls to the ground to plead with his father to spare him from what was to come. Then as Peter violently protects and defends him we can feel his submission.

We walk up the hill with the group to the house of Annas the high priest and imagine how Peter felt as filled with fear he denied knowing the very friend he wanted to protect. We can sit with Jesus in the cold and dark stone cell in the basement of Annas' house. Then we can follow him back across the Kidron Valley in the early dawn hours to Jerusalem and to Pilate's headquarters. We can stand with the crowd as Jesus endures the humiliation of being mocked, spit upon and beaten by the guards.

Fear may come over us too as the crowd roars for Pilate to crucify our dearly beloved teacher. Maybe you feel driven back by your fears and the deep sadness of knowing that Jesus was to be crucified like a common criminal? Wasn't he the Messiah! You leave the crowd behind and walk away in utter dejection at the tragedy unfolding in the city?

To be sure it never feels natural or comfortable to stay in a place, be it emotional or physical that is filled with pain and sorrow. The premature death of a loved one is an experience that most of us would rather not have and for the most part are not prepared to endure. In fact, most people I would say feel repelled by the suffering of others like two magnets of the same polarity. It is hard for us to come close to pain and suffering because our emotional systems become overloaded and the only way to ease the pain is to turn away.

I hold dear in my memory an encounter I had with young first-time parents in the neonatal ICU at the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital in Manhattan. They had just welcomed the birth of their daughter Juliana who seemed at first quite normal. However, within a couple of days Juliana was diagnosed with an inoperable glioblastoma. At a family meeting the clinical staff laid out the facts and the prognosis. I offered some pastoral support. The gravity of the diagnosis and the accompanying sorrow slowly sank in for everyone.

When I went to visit them the next day I found them sitting in a curtain enclosed cubicle holding their baby whose heart rate had weakened during the morning. The staff hovered outside. As I went in to see them I felt the full force of their sorrow. Without my pastoral training the intensity of the atmosphere would have driven me right back out. It was very sad.

The small cubicle was thick with emotion and the beeping sound of Juliana's heart monitor. I prayed with her and her parents and together we prayed the Lord's Prayer. I stepped out for a moment to speak with a nurse only to hear the steady wail of the heart monitor and the cry of an anguished mother as her first and only child died in her arms. We went in to be with them and for the doctor to officially pronounce Juliana's death. For the parents, it was just too much, they stood up, placed Juliana's body in the isolette and left. No longer could they bear the pain. It was over.

The friends of Jesus might have experienced a similar emotional repulsion, an often-unconscious force that pushes a person away from such sorrowful and tragic circumstances. We have limited capacity to handle such deeply emotional situations. It is no wonder that most disciples eventually abandoned Jesus. It was only his closest family members and the beloved John that went to Calvary with him.

Even now almost 20 centuries removed from the events of that morning, many Christians are still repelled by the thought of Jesus torture and death. Not many people want to remember this part of the Triduum. We only have to compare the numbers of people that will attend a worship service today and the many more that will attend the Easter Vigil and Sunday services.

"The symbol of the dying Christ is both tragic and comic, terrible and, by conventional standards, ridiculous" says Kenneth Leach in his book "We preach Christ crucified." Jesus' death upon a cross has often been called a folly. Leech calls it "the feast of divine folly." By folly we mean that the ridding of Jesus from the world through such a violent death, a death upon a

cross that was reserved for criminals and radical subversives, lacked any good sense or foresight.

The high priest Caiaphas had nurtured the desire that one man, Jesus should die to save the Jewish population. He thought, like many today, that eliminating an immediate threat would return the community to a relatively safe status quo. Jesus was to be the ultimate scapegoat. How wrong he was?

We might also feel that Jesus was foolish to offer himself up so easily to the guards. He could have continued to evade the religious authorities as he had done many times before. He could have let Peter defend him with the sword. But Jesus, knowing the purpose for which he was called to place himself in this position, went willingly after his betrayal. Many people outside our faith would indeed believe his actions were foolish or folly.

It was really only Jesus who fully understood his actions. He knew that his death was coming and that it was necessary for him to die in order to be resurrected and united to his Father. His disciples never fully understood what Jesus had told them several times before his arrest. This once hailed king figure was to be killed like a common criminal in the worst way humanly imaginable.

The pain and sorrow of Jesus arrest, torture and death repelled his disciples who fled the darkness and despair. The world had seemingly turned on their teacher who preached peace, reconciliation, justice and love for God and for one another. They may have fled perplexed and disappointed that Jesus' actions did seem foolish.

The journey from family and community to separation and death, and finally resurrection is a journey that we all must take and often do take in our lives. Jesus calls us to die to ourselves so that we might live a new life in Christ. It is a journey that many people are repelled from. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship* that "when Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die."

The cross, as a symbol of Jesus death, is central to our faith life. This means that the wretchedness of the cross, his suffering, torments and pain are all central to our faith. This of course seems counterintuitive to the upbeat message we hear from all quarters. These messages diminish sadness, suffering and pain and promote optimism, vitality and prosperity.

When we remember Jesus' life journey and especially how his life ended we can identify with our own suffering and that of others. Our experience helps to shape our ability to sustain life and offer the unconditional love that is grounded in the cross.

When we can own, and then share our experiences of suffering and pain we are able to attend to those around us that struggle. By doing so we are living into our calling as the body of Christ. When we can sit with a grieving parent of a child killed in a school shooting, or comfort the parents of a young lesbian that has taken her life because of bullying, or hug a child whose

parents are hopelessly addicted to opioids, then we are healing as Jesus healed and helping people find their own resurrection path. We are then acting from our truest faith, our life experience and our commitment to love and serve the suffering of our world.

Jesus died that we might be freed from death and that we might have hope in reconciliation with God. Our presence here today signals our understanding of the suffering of our world and the need to remember Jesus' experience as we hold together both the sadness of Good Friday with the joy of Easter Day.

We must always remember there is no Easter without Good Friday.

Amen