

April 10 2009

Matthew 27:32-56
Broken Love

Today we have come together for this Good Friday celebration because as people of faith we know that we cannot enter into the full joy of Easter without facing the agony of the cross. Those who would skip from the joy of the Palm Sunday procession right into the joy of Easter's triumphant alleluias are left with a faith that bears no relevance to the sorrow and suffering and pain and grief that are so much a part of human life. Their Easter faith is reserved for another life in another world. But we have come together on this Good Friday because the cross of Calvary keeps our faith grounded in the harsh realities of the world we live in here and now.

If you have seen even a glimpse of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, you know that crucifixion was a brutal form of execution in the first century. It was meant to publically humiliate the condemned and send a warning to those who might otherwise be inclined to resist the authority of the mighty Roman Empire. No vital part of the body was injured in a crucifixion because the intent was to induce a slow and agonizing death. It was not uncommon for the condemned to hang on a cross for days, exposed to the ravages of weather and insects and birds, unable to care for their bodily needs. Eventually they died of suffocation when their strength gave out and they were no longer able to push themselves up with their legs to breath.

Sometimes when we gather on Good Friday our attention is drawn to the severity of the suffering that Jesus endured on the cross. We contemplate the agony of the cross filled with shame and remorse. After all that Christ endured for your sake, you better be grateful. You better honor the sacrifice of Jesus by living a life worthy of your calling. You better not let his suffering be in vane.

Sometimes on Good Friday we turn Jesus into the Superman of suffering who endured more agony than any other human could possibly endure. But in truth, it was not a very remarkable crucifixion. Crucifixions were common in Jesus' day, and his was shorter than most, perhaps because of the flogging Jesus had endured before he was nailed to the cross. Mark tells us that Jesus died within six hours. At three in the afternoon, he cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And then he breathed his last.

We don't really find a theology of the cross in any of the gospels. Our reading today from Mark's gospel simply reports the events that transpired on the day when Jesus died. It is like reading a news report relating the details of what actually happened. Simon was compelled to carry the cross, the crucifixion began at nine o'clock in the morning, a sign was displayed above his head with his seditious claim to King of the Jews, the crowd mocked him, bandits were

crucified next to him, at noon darkness descended over the land, a drink of wine mixed with myrrh was offered to the condemned man, women from Galilee looked on from a distance.

Mark doesn't speculate on the meaning of the cross. Those theological queries are left for others to take up. It is one of Paul's favorite themes in his letters, especially the letter to the Romans. But Mark isn't compelled to make sense out of the crucifixion. There is no speculation about it being an atoning sacrifice, nothing about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, nothing about the price of our sins being paid for in the blood of Jesus. For Mark, it is just an execution. Jesus was crucified for sedition by the Romans.

At the moment of Jesus' death, Mark reports that the curtain in the temple was torn in half from top to bottom and a Roman soldier acknowledged, "Truly this man was the Son of God." It wasn't until the third day that the reality of that truth would be revealed in the resurrection of Jesus.

I don't have a very sophisticated theology of the cross. I can't imagine a bloodthirsty God whose righteous anger needed to be appeased by a perfect and unblemished sacrifice. That theology may have made sense to the ancient Hebrew people whose worship was centered on offering sacrifices to God on the altar, but not to me. Jesus revealed a God who is made known to us in love, not fear. He taught us that "perfect love casts out all fear." And Jesus paying the price for my sin doesn't make much sense to me either. God is either gracious, or not. If God is gracious, then I don't understand the need for someone else to settle my debt. As the Psalmist reminds us, "the sacrifice acceptable to God is (my own) broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:17)."

The gospels don't really give us a theology of the cross and yet today the cross of Jesus is venerated by all of us who are Christians as a symbol of triumph and hope and salvation. Today crosses adorn our bodies and our churches and our gravestones. It has become much more to us than the symbol of a brutal form of execution. Because Jesus rose from the grave on Easter morning, the cross has become for us a sign of God's deep love for the world.

Even after the blood of the beloved Son of God was shed by human hands, God has not condemned the world. Instead of destroying the world, God continues to reach out to redeem the world in love. The cross is the ultimate answer to the question raised by Paul in his letter to the Romans: "What can separate us from the love of God?" If not this, if not the cross, than surely nothing can ever separate us from God's love. "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:32).

Maybe the cross has less to say about Jesus than it does about us. Maybe it is a reminder of the level of cruelty that we are capable of inflicting on others. Maybe it is a symbol of our intolerance, of our own inability to embody the love of God that was so perfectly embodied in the life of Jesus. Maybe it is a sign of the brokenness of our sinful world filled with hatred and violence and injustice.

The cross is the symbol that reveals the worst in us while confirming the depth of God's gracious love. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 35-39)"

Easter without Good Friday doesn't really have much to do with us or the life we know in this world. Those who skip from the joy of the palms to the joy of Easter's alleluias are left with a faith that is reserved for another life in another world. And Good Friday without Easter is just another brutal crucifixion. But together, the passion and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ give us the cross as symbol of triumph and hope and salvation as we all share the journey of faith that always leads us through death to life anew. Amen.