

Homily for Good Friday

March 29, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (He shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.)

Responsory: Psalm 31 (Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.)

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 (Through his suffering, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.)

Gospel: John 18:1-19:42 (The Passion according to John.)

Crucifixion was a truly awful spectacle, and that was quite intentional on the part of the Romans who practiced it. This terrifying and very public form of execution inspired fear and obedience in the populations under their rule. It sent a clear message to all the onlookers: “*Don’t follow this man’s example, or you could end up just like him, hanging on a cross.*”

Everyone who witnessed Jesus’ suffering and death thought that they were watching a helpless victim, powerless before the authorities who inflicted such cruel and unjust punishment on him. They could all see with their own eyes the horrible things that evil men were doing to Jesus. But something much more important was hidden from their sight. They could not see what *Jesus* was doing — for them, and for us, and for all humankind. Fortunately for us, the Prophet Isaiah expressed very eloquently what was *really* happening on that cross:

*It was our infirmities that he bore,
our sufferings that he endured.
He was pierced for our offenses,
crushed for our sins;
upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole,
by his stripes we were healed.
The Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all.*

*Through his suffering, my servant will justify many,
and their guilt he shall bear.
He shall take away the sins of many,
and win pardon for their offenses.*

Jesus was not a helpless victim in this story; he was the protagonist. He was sent into the world by the Father to complete a mission — the saving mission described in Isaiah’s prophecy. And he understood that his final act, the sacrifice that would make us whole, would require him to give up his life and die on a cross. The three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all show Jesus *agonizing* over this decision in the Garden of Gethsemane. He doesn’t *want* to die, but he knows that he *must*, in order to do his Father’s will. Once he decides to hand himself over and not offer any resistance, from that point on he does *appear* powerless,

“like a lamb led to the slaughter,” as Isaiah said. Because we know about Jesus’ prayer in the Garden, we know that all of these events transpired by his own choice. But it certainly didn’t look that way to anyone who witnessed his Way of the Cross.

John’s passion narrative, which we always hear on Good Friday, makes Jesus’ agency in this whole drama much more obvious. He appears to be in control from start to finish. The guards can’t even arrest him until he gives his permission! When Pilate arrogantly claims to have the power to grant Jesus life or death, Jesus flatly tells him that he’s wrong: “You would have *no* power over me if it had not been given to you from above.” Although the other gospels portray Jesus as so beaten down by his torturers that he needs help carrying his cross, John says emphatically that Jesus carries the cross himself. He doesn’t need any help. Then, on the cross, Jesus does not cry out in agony or despair. He is not insulted and disparaged by the onlookers. In fact, he seems almost like a king, majestically holding court from his throne upon the cross. He calmly instructs his mother to let go of him and become a spiritual mother to his disciples, symbolized by the Beloved Disciple, who is there with her. And, when Jesus deems that he has accomplished all that the Father had sent him to do, he solemnly declares, “It is finished.” With that, he bows his head and hands over his spirit to the Father.

While Matthew, Mark and Luke provide a more accurate portrayal of Jesus’ *suffering*, John more clearly shows us Jesus’ *intentions* as he went to his death. His sacrifice was an extraordinary act of *love* for all of us sinners. Jesus deliberately offered up his life in exchange for ours, taking upon himself the punishment for all of our sins, so that we might be healed and reconciled to the Father.

This is why we venerate the cross, an instrument of torture and death, with such devotion. Our Lord’s sacrifice transformed this symbol of terror into a symbol of divine love. Whenever we gaze upon the image of Christ crucified, we remember how he died *for us*, even while we were still sinners. In fact, he died for us *because* we were sinners, with no other hope for salvation apart from him and his cross. Now he has become our great High Priest in the heavens, our intercessor before the Father. As the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, Christ is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, because he has similarly been tested in every way, *including suffering and death*, yet without sin. So, moved by love and repentance, let us heed the author’s advice and “confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” Whenever we feel so ashamed of our sin that we are tempted to *turn away* from the Lord, let us remember that Jesus died on the cross so that we could *turn back* and feel God’s loving embrace once again.

Crucifixion was supposed to function as a warning and a deterrent, but in the case of Jesus, it has done the reverse. The message that we receive from Jesus’ passion and death is exactly the *opposite* of what his executioners intended: “*Follow this man’s example*, and you could end up just like him, sharing in heavenly glory.” By his holy cross and resurrection, he has indeed set us free, from sin and death and despair. So, let us adore him and praise him, *and follow him*.