

## Not Without Tears

It was the last day of school before the Christmas break. The Christmas pageant was over and now the parents waited in the hallway for their kindergarten age children. They were going to take the children home for the long-anticipated Christmas holiday.

As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried the “surprise,” the brightly wrapped package on which each child had been working diligently now for weeks.

One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat and wave, all at the same time, slipped and fell. The “surprise” flew out of his hands, landed on the tile floor and broke with an obvious and resounding ceramic crash.

The child’s first reaction was one of stunned silence. In a moment though, he realized what had happened and he began sobbing inconsolably. His father, in an effort to comfort him, knelt down and said, “Come on now, don’t cry. It doesn’t matter. It’s not that big a deal. It really doesn’t matter.”

But his mother, much wiser in such affairs, swept the boy into her arms and said, “Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.” And she, too, began to weep with her son.

From the first Good Friday until now there have been, with some variations on either side of the matter, these two different responses to the death of Jesus.

One response is that which says, in one way or another, “Look, this is no big deal. Don’t cry. After all, Easter is just around the corner.” Or, to avoid the day altogether. If the narratives are to be trusted, and on this point I believe they can be, all of the men fled the scene that day. In spite of their prior pledges of loyalty, when this day came, they said, “I’m outta here.”

It was the women who stuck around. This faithful steadfastness is poignantly captured by Michelangelo in his carving of the Pieta where Mary, the Blessed Virgin, is tenderly holding her son, Jesus, just after he has been removed from the cross. You can see in her expression, “This matters a great deal.”

There is a tendency for us not to stick around on this, the starkest and most solemn day in the entire liturgical year, Good Friday. I can understand that.

Good Friday is about as bleak as it can get. Further, Good Friday confronts us with what it means really to follow Jesus and not simply to believe in him - but at a safe distance.

Jesus, as well as his early followers, was not done away with because of saying things like, “Consider the lilies of the field.” He was seen as a threat to the established power of his day and as someone who had to be gotten rid of so that the status quo - that is a Latin phrase meaning, “the mess we are in” - so that things as they were didn’t get challenged too much.

Good Friday is a look, a hard and realistic look, at what happened. It is not about trying to make sense of what happened, it is not about saying, “There there, everything will be okay.” It is certainly not about saying, “It doesn’t matter.” Good Friday is not about fleeing the scene.

Nor is Good Friday about feeling bad where some preacher shames us from the pulpit. There was a time when people went to church to feel bad because it made them feel good. I know that may sound weird to some of you but in my much younger days I attended plenty of church services like

that. I imagine some of you may have as well.

In 1962 John Steinbeck's book, "Travels With Charlie" was published. I read it when it first came out. The book is about a road trip across America Steinbeck took with his dog, Charlie. Steinbeck said it was his effort to discover America. In the book he tells of visiting a church one Sunday morning in Vermont. I'm editing and somewhat modifying his account:

"I shaved, dressed in a suit, polished my shoes, whited my sepulcher and took my way to a church. I sat in the rear of the spotless, polished place of worship. The prayers were to the point, directing the attention of the Almighty to certain weaknesses and un-divine tendencies I know to be mine and I could only suppose were shared by others gathered there.

"The service did my heart and I hope my soul some good. It had been a long time since I had heard such an approach. It is our practice now, at least in large cities, to find from our psychiatric priesthood that our sins aren't really sins at all but accidents that are set in motion by forces beyond our control. There was no such nonsense in this church. The minister, a man of iron with tool steel eyes and a delivery like a pneumatic drill, opened up with prayer and assured us that we were a pretty sorry lot. And he was right. We didn't amount to much to start with, and due to our own tawdry efforts we had been slipping ever since.

"Then, having softened us up, he went into a glorious sermon, a fire and brimstone sermon. Having proved that we, or perhaps only I, were no damn good, he painted with cool certainty what was likely to happen to us if we didn't make some basic reorganizations for which he didn't hold out much hope.

"I began to feel good all over. For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing a togetherness that causes emptiness. But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. [This sermon left me knowing that] I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it.

"I felt so revived in spirit that I put five dollars in the plate, and afterward, in front of the church, shook hands warmly with the minister and as many of the congregation as I could.

"All across the country I went to church on Sundays, a different denomination every week, but nowhere did I find the quality of that Vermont preacher. He forged a religion designed to last."

You'll not get that kind of fire and brimstone preaching from me. But what we are about is forging a religion that is designed to last and such a religion can be strong stuff. That is why I say to you that there is value in standing at the foot of the cross and looking at Jesus, not through the eyes of the disciples who couldn't get out of there fast enough nor through a neurotic guilt designed, ironically, to make us feel like feeling bad is good enough. But, rather to look at Jesus on the cross through eyes that allow us to see a truer and deeper meaning of the cross than many of us have been led to see.

Every since Anselm in the 11th century, who concocted one of the most successful pieces of bad theology ever written, many have been taught to look at the cross and say, "Look at what Jesus did for me." A more spiritually helpful and theologically honest stance would be to look at Jesus spread-eagle up there on his cross and say, "Look what we did to him."

Whatever else we can say about this day, we can clearly and honestly say that Jesus was a victim of the system. Good Friday is a chance for us to see and to come clean about to what degree we are part of the system of our time.

You know what the system is. The system is the way things are. Those who know the system and know how the system works can benefit from it and stay safe. Those who don't, who are somehow because of their skin color or economic status or educational level or immigration status or whatever are outside of the system . . . well, too bad for them.

Jesus was outside of the system. He appealed to people not only outside of the system but victimized by the system. Jesus was a rebel and as such was executed by both the religious and political authorities of his time because what he said, what he did, who he was would have done away with the established order. He was not a friend of "the system." He saw the Sacred and the Holy in places those in power didn't want to see it, couldn't afford to see it.

Had Jesus simply been some sort of itinerant preacher with some vague "spiritual" ideas, he would have been left alone. He talked way too much about justice and mercy. Had only he been able to get along, you know, maybe had dinner with Herod from time to time, serving as his advisor. Perhaps if he had given some lectures to the Sanhedrin on some obscure theological matters, he could have lived comfortably. And, of course, been totally forgotten about by now.

Good Friday gives us a chance to get a clear look at Jesus. Who was he? What did he really do and say? These are important questions. Because, how we answer them ought to inform other matters about our faith - like what does it mean to believe in this person? Or, to follow him? Or, to be part of a group who draw their religious identity from their association with him?

For centuries now, however, Jesus has been rather domesticated, tamed. Somewhat like a household pet. In his own time he was seen as dangerous. It is true that he was compassionate toward the unfortunate, open to honest inquirers, devoted and obedient to his understanding of "the will of God."

It is also true that he insulted the respectable clergy of his day. He called them hypocrites. When he referred to Herod as "that old fox," he was giving voice to the most insulting thing that could be said about a person at that time. He loved to party and he went about with disreputable people. What else could have earned him the reputation as a "drunkard and friend of the riff-raff."

When he was asked what he stood for, his response was, "I stand for the rule of God." "And what," they asked, "is that." And he told them. He told them in ways they couldn't miss. He told stories that were and are so offensive that they killed him for telling them, and for the truths his stories carried, and which, since then, others have been able to brush aside by saying things like, "Well, that doesn't really apply to us. That was then. This is now. Besides, you have to be realistic and live in the real world. There, there, don't cry, it doesn't really matter. Etc. Etc."

The peril, or perils, involved in having spiritual practices that put us on a path to follow Jesus and end up standing at the foot of the cross are the same now as they were then.

We live in a culture that values health and happiness, a long and happy life. Jesus had none of those things. He did not have a stable family life or decent home or worldly success or at least a lack of public embarrassment. There is nothing in the Good Friday story about protection, security, or absolute clarity. Jesus didn't have any of those things.

I've been in ministry for over fifty years now and so far I've met no one who has a magic formula as to how to experience God's love except going through one's own Good Friday. There are no exceptions. There are no short-cuts. The hard thing to remember when such hardships come is that God is not against us. Somehow, like Jesus, we must hang on to the faith that though God protects us from nothing, God sustains us in everything.

I've seen, over the years, more people give up on God and the spiritual life because of suffering and hardship than any other single thing. That is running away from Good Friday. Don't do that.

Look at him. It matters, it matters very much what happened there that day. Yes, see the agonizing pain and loneliness, though it is too fearful to imagine. But, see also that in the midst of that pain and loneliness and in spite of it he was able to cry out, "Father, I place my life in your hands!"

This is the essence of faith where even the most intense suffering and feelings of being God-forsaken could not sway him.

Good Friday calls us to place our lives as did he in the hands and heart of Sacred Mystery. Through our tears for his pain that we caused him and for our own pain because we live in the same world he did we can see and say, "This matters. It matters very much."

*A homily given on Good Friday, March 30, 2018 at St. Paul's in Houston, Texas by the Rev. Dr. Bill Kerley*