

Good Friday
Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22:1-11; John 19:1-37
April 2, 2010
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Here we are again. The faithful have gathered to be with Jesus on this toughest of all his days. He prayed to Abba, Father, hoping there might be another way around the cross – a path without total humiliation, rejections, loathing, violence and life-ebbing torture.

Maybe in his generosity of spirit, his prayer was also for Judas and Peter, for Pilate and the Jewish leaders, as well as for those who would mock him, strike him and execute him: “Abba, Father, spare them from having to live with the errors of their ways and lowering themselves to the basest of human behavior.” And maybe he was praying for us: “Abba, Father, spare generations of followers having to relive my awful dying day year after year.”

Alas, Jesus’ prayer wasn’t answered. Jesus would experience the fullness of humankind’s limitations and capacity for suffering, pain, aloneness, fear and banishment. If indeed Jesus was God, as we believe, he didn’t get any free passes, exemptions or privileges. He was born poor, lived sparingly, washed feet and died in disgrace. We follow him and pledge him our allegiance precisely because he thought it was well worthwhile. Jesus somehow makes severe suffering a positive and redemptive activity. The cross becomes the principal symbol of our faith, yet we don’t want it for ourselves. We hope if Jesus lived it, we won’t have to.

You can’t very well take the agony of a cruel death out of Good Friday. If Jesus’ suffering is good, can ours be? Can our suffering serve a larger purpose than just to diminish us, defeat us or make us bitter and vengeful?

Wednesday several of us visited fourteen stations marked around the church grounds as part of a service called “Stations of the Cross.” We walked with Jesus from the time he was condemned by Pontius Pilate until he was laid in the rock-hewn tomb. At each station we read a passage pertinent to what happened to Jesus, followed by a prayer.

At “Station 9 – Jesus falls a third time,” the prayer was: “O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and lose for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.”

And at the next, “Station 10 – Jesus is stripped of his garments,” we prayed again similarly, “Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of this present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed....”

Gladly suffer shame and loss... accept joyfully the sufferings of this present time. Those prayers catch in our throats.

We're sorry today that Jesus had to suffer at all. We really don't want anyone to suffer, least of all ourselves and our love ones. We work hard to arrange our lives so we can avoid all suffering. I think we've got it in our heads that with enough resources and resourcefulness, we should be able to bypass it altogether.

We fight it and resent it; we treat it as an intruder and in some cases inflict suffering so as not to be its victim.

Do we ever gladly suffer shame or loss? Do we ever accept joyfully the sufferings of these present times? Strange prayers for sure, for even Jesus prayed that his cup of suffering might pass. Even so, Jesus did something few, if any, people ever do. He accepted the prospect and delivery of suffering. Even though it was totally undeserved, even though he was falsely accused and unjustly sentenced to death, he didn't cry foul, plead innocence, or threaten retribution.

He acted in a totally "other" way. No one then and no one today would recommend his defense strategy, which was to stage no defense whatsoever. He yielded, submitted, handed himself over to be crucified. He trusted in God. He trusted in God.

He saved others, but he wouldn't lift a finger to save himself. He was passionate about his cause of proclaiming the Kingdom of God – different from the Roman Kingdom of domination by violent force, different from the Jewish piety of strict obedience to the rules. His kingdom was not top down nor reserved for patrons only, but open to all who know they need the help of God and neighbor.

In the end, he had to live the only requirement of God's kingdom – to love fully. To love his disciples, betrayers, detractors and enemies required yielding to suffering and death. He didn't do it to show courage and heroism. He did it to show love. He did it to be love for everyone.

The cross is another of Christianity's great mysteries, overlaid with numerous layers of meaning. But one that must never be overlooked or undervalued is God's ultimate expression of love beyond our total comprehension and imitation.

Today we feel sorrow, but perhaps jaw-dropping awe is more appropriate. Someone said, rightly so, "On Good Friday, we at best enter a 'wordless place.' If we leave with only one thought, one emotion, one word, may it be,

Thank you,
Thank you,
Thank you.