

## Sermons for the Journey

The Rev. Duncan Burns

Good Friday – Year B

Friday, March 30, 2018

I have spent many a night as a priest waiting for someone to pass into the next life and I have come to appreciate God's presence in the silence and in the tears. I remember one Good Friday when I got a call just before midnight. The nurse asked me to come to the hospital and provide unction. I got up, got dressed, and drove to the hospital. I spoke to the nurse to ask if they had called the family. She told me that her son had to work that weekend and wouldn't be able to come into town until Sunday night. There was sadness in her answer because she was passing away. I entered her room and she was breathing heavily, struggling with every breath. Her feet were ice cold and I could feel death slowly creeping across her body. I put another blanket on her and grabbed her arm with both hands as to embrace her. I knew that she had a fractured relationship with her family because they never visited her once at the nursing home. There were no pictures in her room. She never got flowers or cards, so the Eucharistic Ministers from the church were all she had.

So I softly began to pray the psalms. She did not say a word, but looked into my eyes with thankfulness for my presence. I sat and prayed with her until morning and her final labored breath as the sun began to rise. A great sense of peace rested on my soul. Because of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, death is bittersweet.

I had preached that day about the terrible things that the Crowd and the Romans had done to Jesus on Good Friday. The scourging by the Roman Guards was difficult to listen to. The guards played games of chance to determine how they would flog, humiliate, and torture our Lord and Savior. Jesus stood in front of the crowd after the Roman guards had done their worst. They shouted,

“Crucify Him!”

“He was despised and rejected by others”

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole”

“By his bruises we are healed”

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted. Yet he did not open his mouth”

(Isaiah 52).

We live in a confusing world of fractured relationships. When I stand at the foot of the cross, I sometimes wonder how we can treat each other with such contempt.

On Shelter Island, an 87-year-old Episcopal priest was robbed and tied to a chair for several days. In Huntington Station a father of four was deported for a traffic ticket.

Last year 64,000 people died of opioid overdoses, many of them hooked on the opioid drug due to the greed of one pharma company. Last month a student brought a gun to school and killed 17 people in Florida.

For me, standing at the cross can often bring sorrow and sadness. The *mysterium tremendum* is the awe and trembling that we contemplate when we experience separation and brokenness. But this day is not just a day of sorrow and sadness. Jesus on the cross is the pivotal moment where God's redemptive plan is carried out. It is the place where we are made righteous again with God. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) Through no effort on our part, we are forgiven of all our sins, we are set right with God, and we are offered salvation. Salvation occurs when we realize what God has done for us. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17)

I feel helpless to do anything about all the sin in the world today, but I feel the abiding presence of God's love despite the suffering and pain. I know that through Jesus' death, the sins that we commit from time to time are forgiven. Paul said in the third chapter of Ephesians, "I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Too often we get stuck in the pain of Jesus Christ on Good Friday without seeing the hope of the cross. The world is made whole through the suffering of Jesus Christ. Those who thirst are given a drink, those who are hungry are given food, those who are lonely are visited, and all of us who are broken are made whole.

As we look at the cross on Good Friday, we re-member an event that changed the whole world forever. God came to humanity in the person in Jesus Christ and we rejected, arrested, convicted, tortured and executed him in one of the most inhumane manners ever devised. In this one act, our sinful, violent, controlling nature was changed through love, not fear. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) It is often only at times when we are standing helplessly, that we can realize that our sinful nature can be changed by love. God in heaven knows what we are experiencing in our lives because Christ has walked our walk and felt our pain. We have been forever changed by the love of God that we have received and by the love that we give. In his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway offers these profound words: "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." On the night that I held that woman's hand, I contemplated the cross in a new way. Instead of looking from the

foot of the cross in sorrow, I was looking out from the cross itself in joy. The *mysterium tremendum* filled me with a different awe.

In my Lenten Tuesday night talk on being created in the image of God, I spoke of an angled mirror. We have the ability to see Christ, to be in contemplative union with him, and to reflect back the image of Christ from ourselves. In our Thrift Shop the poor and naked in our community are clothed. By giving food to the food pantry, the hungry are fed. The lonely are visited, the sick are healed, and those who thirst are given Living Water at St. John's. We are preparing a ministry for farm workers out East. Our ECW just send \$12,800 to 19 local charities. Our racial reconciliation committee is working hard with other churches and our community towards an end to racism. Last Saturday, we attended the March for our Lives. High school students stood in front of thousands of concerned citizens and asked us to take action against gun violence in our schools. We all came back with renewed hope that we can defeat the forces of Evil if we all work together. Our high school kids stood up and spoke out for an end to fear and death in our schools.

We can all become part of God's redemptive plan by picking up our own cross and following Christ. The Christian Church needs to do more than staring and praying at the foot of the cross of Jesus. We need to get out there and be a part of God's plan.

Saint Catherine of Siena said, "O eternal God, light surpassing all other light because all light comes forth from You! O fire surpassing every fire because You alone are the first that burns without consuming! You consume whatever sin and selfishness You find in the soul. Yet Your consuming does not distress the soul but fattens her with insatiable love (In Her Words, p. 200). However, the truth is expressed, the insatiable love of Jesus Christ remains our measure of reality. Our mission at St. John's is to Know Christ and to make Him Known. As you contemplate the cross, try to imagine yourself as the suffering servant, giving of yourself for the good of the community.

Bishop Provenzano asks all members of the diocese to pray one hour per day to deepen our relationship with Christ. In his Holy Chrism Mass he preached about engaging in an intense "for otherness." We are called to a life of self-giving to God and the world. We can become the face of Christ to a world that has lost its way. Deliberate prayer leads to a deeper faith, communion with God, and a desire "for otherness," the insatiable love that comes when we pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Amen.