

Good Friday, Year A; John 18:1-19:1-42

In the Western Church, the day of Jesus execution has long been called "Good Friday." In the Orthodox church it is "Great Friday. Both terms seem to me a bit unusual, at least if one focuses on the events of the day: three persons tortured and killed in the cruelest way known, one of them at the initiative of the Roman authorities for political reasons. It is only with the overlay of a theology that attaches cosmic significance to Jesus' death that we can say it was a good day, a great day.

To a considerable extent, the Gospel of John, gives a theological account of Jesus' death. Jesus, in John's gospel, demonstrates that he, Jesus, is in control of the events. Thus, he says at the the Last Supper, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Judas does not sneak away from the table; Jesus sends him away. Jesus gives a long farewell discourse, but no prayers of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. When the soldiers arrive, Jesus is not identified by a kiss, but rather Jesus announces, grandly, "I am he," at which the soldiers fall down. Before Pilot Jesus is not silent; he speaks of a superior kingdom...not from this world. Jesus carries his own cross, and does not stumble. There are no cries of anguish on the cross, but rather a climactic declaration of accomplishment and completion: "It is finished." For John, Jesus is the true King of all human kind.

It is from John's perspective, writing 50 or 60 years after Jesus' death, that we can see Jesus death as a good thing, as an event planned by God for the benefit of human kind. And it is so much more comfortable to look past the suffering and injustice, the loss of human life, and recognize that even in such an event, we can see God at work.

The risk in reflecting on Jesus' death through a theological lense is that we may be led to ignore the humanity of Christ. I recall as a child being told that Jesus, as a child, was a wiz at math, since he was God and therefore knew everything. We know Jesus was a flexh and blood human, he struggled like most students with his education. And to focus only on a theological view of Christ is to miss the wonder of the incarnation and to obscure the reality of Jesus' suffering and death. And that is why people find the experience of the Stations of the Cross so meaningful. Each station reminds us of Jesus' humanity.

In John's gospel, there is a mysterious character, Nicodemus, mentioned only three times in the gospels. In John 3 Nicodemus had a discussion with Jesus at night about what Jesus meant by being born from above. In John 7 Nicodemus speaks up for Jesus before the chief priests, saying "But surely our Law does not allow us to pass judgement on anyone without first giving him a hearing and discovering what he is doing. Then when Jesus is taken off the cross, Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathaea in taking Jesus' body and wrapping it in linen cloths with the spices Nicodemus had brought.

Nicodemus was a reflective, insightful person, willing to both speak up about Jesus right to be heard, and to handle Jesus dead body, the body of one executed as a criminal, a remarkably bold step for a Jewish male who was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. Cautious, late, but in the end Nicodemus was decisive.

Like Nicodemus we are all invited this Good Friday to be decisive about Jesus, to join in God's great act of redemption, whether we are bold or hesitant, early or late, a saints or sinner.

*He was pierced because of our rebellions
and crushed because of our crimes.
He bore the punishment that made us whole;
by his wounds we are healed.
Like sheep we had all wandered away,
each going its own way,
but the Lord let fall on him all our crimes. (CEB)*

Amen

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