



Palm Sunday of our Lord's Passion March 28, 2010 C

THE HOLIEST WEEK OF THE YEAR

**Was it God's will that Jesus die a criminal's death
to save us?**

Dying without a sense of God's presence

Today begins the holiest week of the year. The heart of Holy Week is, of course, our celebration of the *Triduum*—Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. The Triduum comprises not so much three separate celebrations as one continuous rite with three parts. The *unitive* nature of the three liturgies is underlined by the omission of a concluding rite on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. These two liturgies are “left hanging,” so to speak—incomplete without that which follows, as if the liturgies of Holy Thursday and Good Friday are saying to us, “*We are not done yet. To be continued.*”

Last year many people said our celebration of the Triduum was the most moving they had ever experienced. Praise God! I hope this year's will also be inspirational and prayerful. Three priests will be available for *confessions* after the Holy Thursday and Good Friday services.

If you rarely attend the Holy Week services, I hope you come to at least one of them this year (see page 5 of this bulletin for times of services). If you usually come to the services, this year try to bring a friend or neighbor. Also, I strongly encourage parents to bring your children to at least one of the Holy Week services. How sad if children grow up with little or no experience of the *most important* celebrations of our entire church year.

Jesus' cruel death—was it God's will?

The Church teaches us that Jesus saved and reconciled humanity to God in and through his death and Resurrection. Since God could have saved humanity in any number of ways, one may wonder why he would choose the cruel death of his Son. We may wonder what kind of a God would save his people by having his only Son die like a criminal. In Rom 11:33, Paul reminds us of the “inscrutable and unsearchable ways of God.”

To be executed on a cross even though one is innocent is *the worst* thing that can happen to a human being. God is willing to allow this to happen to his only Son to show his solidarity with suffering humanity. Only the worst criminals are crucified and now the all-holy God is

executed between two of them. Such is the extent of God's outreach to humanity. “*As the mediator of salvation, Jesus endured torment of body and anguish of spirit. He knew agony, terror and depression... He was truly one with the human condition*” (Diane Bergant).

In what sense was it not God's will for Jesus to die on the cross?

Jesus is executed because he is a big threat to the Jewish establishment (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 574). *Some* of the leadership want to get rid of Jesus and they manipulate Pilate into doing their dirty work. Needless to say, it would be a gross error to blame *all* the Jewish people for the death of Jesus. So Jesus is executed because his enemies want to get rid of him. In this sense, his death is an evil act. It would be a contradiction to say that our all-good God would desire such an evil act. Secondly, it would be wrong to say that God wants a human sacrifice as a price for the sins of humanity. We know from the incident with Abraham and his son, Isaac, that God is very much opposed to human sacrifice (Gen 22:1-19).

In what sense is Jesus' death God's will?

It is God's will that Jesus be faithful to his mission even if it means dying a cruel death. Jesus could easily have escaped death by *not* saying or doing things that threatened the religious leaders. He could have preached a safe gospel. But then he would not have been faithful to his mission. A true prophet says and does what he believes to be true even if it will cost him his life. We see this with the Old Testament prophets.

The examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Oscar Romero, will be helpful here. All three felt called by God to carry out a certain mission—to be liberators of their people and to speak truth to power. All three were assassinated or executed for their “crime.” All three knew that they, like Jesus, would most likely pay the ultimate price for their fidelity to their mission. They could easily have escaped death by preaching a safe message. But in doing so, they would be unfaithful to God and to their mission. So they continued to preach a message that endangered their lives.

Did God will for them to die? “No” and “yes.” All three people died because their enemies wished to get rid of them. It certainly was not God's will that evil people kill good men. God's heart would be deeply grieved by such

an event. *But it was God's will that all three be faithful to their mission even if it meant sacrificing their lives for the liberation of their people.* In this sense, God willed the death of Gandhi, King and Romero. But we also know that God always turns the table on such evil acts. The deaths of Gandhi, King and Romero brought about significant progress in the liberation of their people from oppression.

Their sacrificial deaths give us some glimpse into the significance of the death of Jesus. Because he is God in human form, his death is infinitely more valuable for all of humanity. Looking at the death of Jesus in this way does not make God a bloodthirsty God. Rather, it makes him someone who wants us to be faithful to the truth we know. Looking at Jesus' death in this way helps us to see that we are saved by an act of *sacrificial love*. God takes what is intended as an evil act and uses it to save the world.

In one of his poems, Irish poet William Butler Yeats uses the phrase "Terrible Beauty" to speak about the death of Christ. It is *terrible* in the sense that it symbolizes what evil people will do to stop goodness from moving forward. The cross is *beautiful* in that it symbolizes what Jesus is willing to do to show his love for sinful humanity.

Experiencing God's absence while dying

Dying, in most if not all cases, is one of the toughest events that most of us may have to deal with. (I say 'most' because some of us will die suddenly.) What would surely help us in the dying process is a sense of God's comforting presence. Not everyone receives this blessing as the following article by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser states in this article which appeared some years ago in Florida Catholic. He writes:

"A common soldier dies without fear, but Jesus died afraid." Iris Murdock wrote those words and they teach one of the lessons of Gethsemane. The Garden of Gethsemane is also the place where we are put to the test. What does this mean?

The great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once wrote a book ("In Memoriam") within which he tried to come to grips with his mother's death. The manner of her death had surprised him and left him struggling with some painful doubts and questions. Why?

His mother had lived a full life; she had died surrounded by a loving family and friends, and in her final illness had been made as comfortable and pain-free as possible by the best of modern medicine. What's troubling about that?

She'd died struggling, it seemed, with her faith, unable to find at the most crucial moment of her life consolation from the God she'd loved and served so faithfully her whole life.

His mother, as he explains at the beginning of the book, had been a woman of exceptional faith and goodness. He was teaching abroad when he received the phone call that she was dying. Flying home to be with her, he mused naively how, painful as it was going to be, his mother's death would be her final gift of herself and her faith to her family. A woman who had given them the faith during her life would surely deepen that gift by the way in which she would face her death.

But what he met in his mother and her struggles as she died was, at least to outward appearances, very different. Far from being peaceful and serene in her faith, she fought doubt and fear, struggling, it seemed, to continue to believe and trust what she had believed in and trusted in her whole life. For Henri, expecting that someone of such deep faith should die serenely and without fear, this was very disconcerting.

"Why," he asked, "would God do this? Why would someone of such deep faith seemingly struggle so badly just before her death?"

The answer eventually came to him: All her life, his mother had prayed to be like Jesus and to die like Jesus. Shouldn't it make sense then that she should die like Jesus, struggling mightily with doubt and darkness, having to utter, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" Jesus didn't die serenely, but struggling with doubt. Shouldn't his most committed followers expect a similar struggle?

The great mystics called this struggle "the dark night of faith," an experience within which God purifies us by seemingly withdrawing all sense of his felt presence so that our thoughts and feelings run dry and we can no longer imagine God's existence. We become, in our hearts and heads, atheists at that moment, though something in our souls knows another reality.

And it's an awful feeling, one of the worst pains possible. Darkness, chaos and fear overwhelm us and we stand, literally, on the brink of nothingness, of nonexistence, sensing our finitude, littleness and loneliness in a way we never sensed them before. We feel exactly what it would mean to live in a universe where there is no God.

The great doctors of the soul tell us that, while nobody is immune from this trial, it is generally experienced in so radical a way only by those who are the most mature in the faith and thus more ready to be purified by its particular fire. It's not surprising then that it is experienced so strongly by people like Henri Nouwen's mother.

The rest of us tend to get it in bits and pieces. Little doses of what Jesus experienced on the cross appear in our lives, reveal the fearful edges of nothingness, and let us taste for a moment what reality would feel like if there were no God. Part of the darkness and pain of that (and why it feels as if we are suddenly atheists) is that, in that

experience, we come to realize that our thoughts about God are not God and how we imagine faith is not faith. God is beyond what we can feel and imagine and faith is not a warm feeling in the heart or a certainty in the mind, but a brand in the soul—beyond thought and feeling. One way or the other, all of us have to learn this. But we'd like the lesson to come to us a bit more gently than how it came to Jesus in his last hours. Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "Do not put us to the test," we're asking God to spare us from this night of doubt.

Have a prayerful Holy Week,

Le Saran