Sunday: Good Friday, Cycle C, 3.25.16

FINDING THE ULTIMATE ANSWER IN YOUR OWN HEART

I think that no one present today can hear the proclamation of the Passion according to John in the same way that we heard it a year or two ago. So many events of violence, terror and atrocity have brought to the public forum suffering that we, as people of faith and members of the Church, have previously heard but twice a year, on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Like a precious heirloom that we take out of its case only on rare occasions; like a famous painting seen in a museum chamber under low lighting, with a security guard close at hand, this story is heard only in hushed tones and with profound reverence. But now, images of the passion played out in the horror of today’s human cruelty dominate our media and assault our senses with a regularity that is frightening. Perhaps now, more than ever, we understand that the cross has cosmic implications for people of all generations.

In Jesus, God comes down into the fullness of human dysfunction: our bigotry and terrorism, our petty jealousies and impatience, our brokenness and sin. In Jesus Christ, God wears the body of anyone who is lost and broken. It’s our task today – yours and mine – to reclaim this precious narrative for what it is meant to be: a source of hope in our times of despair, a word of challenge when our hearts have grown cold, and a means of strength when our human efforts seem to fail and we have no where else to turn. A previous issue of Time magazine, depicting Jesus carrying his cross, asked in bold print: “Why Did Jesus Have to Die?” The answer that so easily rolls off the tongues of many is – “Jesus died for our sins so that we could get to heaven.” I wouldn’t contradict or contest that. But the richness of our faith, the history of our Christian tradition and the promise of resurrection demand that each of us answer that question in our own hearts, and with a response that is borne out of our personal prayer and experience. I can only answer for myself, out of my own conviction and faith: “Why did Jesus have to die?”

Jesus died because he was vulnerable. Although he was in the form of God, he emptied himself and accepted his human life on its own terms, with all its joys and sorrows, its aches and pains, its monotony and its ecstasy. As Son of God he was willing to get caught in the chaos of our world, to take on our brokenness and transform it. In Jesus, God reimagined the world and the possibilities for it because love was the first and the final word.

Jesus died because he championed the truth. He lived as he died. He stood up to the tyrants of his day, those who put law over people, tradition over human need. He believed all children are children of God, and he would not tolerate anyone or any system that failed to recognize that truth. Before Pilate who tried to wield power over Jesus he said: “You would have no power over me at all had it not been given to you from above. I need the courage that comes from the cross of Christ to be unafraid to name my own sins and the sins of the world, and to stand up for the cause of justice and
peace, especially for the needy and the fragile.

Jesus died because he did not cling to this world. He knew his heavenly Father intimately. The Gospel of John places on Jesus’ lips words of an unbreakable bond between Jesus and his Father. *I left the Father and came into the world; I am leaving the world and returning to the Father.* In his prayer to God the Father Jesus said of his disciples: *They don’t belong to this world, just as I don’t belong to this world.* We are citizens of heaven – not physical beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a physical journey. Our ultimate destiny is with God -- God who is the author of life and who wants for us only more life. The cross of Christ assures us that there is more to come. Our anxieties and worries, our frantic search for satisfaction and security... our insatiable thirst for success and accomplishment... can distract us from the vision of what is to be: an ultimate union with Love, with God who is our All in All.

Let me invite you in some quiet time this day and tomorrow to ask the question for yourself: *“Why did Jesus have to die?”* Look to your heart and your faith and, as you prepare for Easter Sunday’s resurrection, know that before he died, Jesus lived a life of goodness, mercy and truth. And after he died, Jesus lives again, now in the goodness, mercy and truth that mark our lives as followers of the One who gave His life for us. This is the Friday of love that goes beyond all we could expect to receive, and the Friday that invites us to love beyond all we could expect to give.

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