

April 14, 2019 Palm Sunday Homily: Several years ago, an American rabbi achieved notoriety for himself by writing a book of non-fiction that was enormously popular with the reading public. Perhaps you may remember the catchy title, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". The rabbi was prompted to write the book after he and his wife suffered the loss of their beloved young son, who died after a long battle with a rare disease that caused premature aging. The book is an extraordinary confession of pain and puzzlement. Why does God let innocent children suffer? Why is their pain and death? The death of his child seemed to him senseless, irrational and absurd. In the book he voices a conclusion based on his reflections. God is indeed all-loving and good. However, he is not all-powerful. God cannot touch the world's suffering. He is too distant, remote and unconcerned about the suffering of the innocent

As Christians, we must politely but firmly disagree with the eminent rabbi. The Eternal Word, Our Lord Jesus Christ, has entered our world, our history, and our life. In our profession of faith, the Creed, we recite the words, "He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried." God touches our humanity by assuming a human nature. In his person, he endures the world's sufferings.

In his reflections on the life of Christ, the biblical scholar Donald Senior asks, "Why would a person like Jesus Christ be put to death? The gospels portray him as a man of integrity, humane and compassionate, someone at ease with the poor and the marginalized." No fewer than three times in Luke's account of the Passion does Pilate proclaim Jesus' innocence. "It is plain that he has done nothing wrong". (Lk.23:4) The so-called "Good Thief" protests that Jesus is innocent of any crime. "This man has done nothing criminal". (Lk.23:41) At the foot of the cross the centurion declared, "This man was innocent beyond doubt". (Lk.23:47) Even Herod could find no reason to condemn him. (Lk.23:15) Practically abandoned, he was without the comfort of his friends and the satisfaction of a completed mission. He was scorned by the rulers of his own people. The men who held him prisoner beat him and mocked him. They blindfolded him and struck him in the face. One of the thieves blasphemed him to his face. He is the face of innocent suffering.

In Isaiah's suffering servant (1st reading) Jesus sees himself. "I gave my back to those who beat me; my cheeks to those who plucked my beard. My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting".

We know the cross as the Passion of Jesus. His cross is a stark reminder to us that God is willing to share our pain. If he had never shared our pain, our suffering, we might find it hard to believe that he walks with us daily. Indeed, one can honestly say that Jesus "walked the walk".

"When Bad Things Happen to Good People" is the title of a bestselling book. But let us be mindful that "bad things" happened to the Holy One of God, Our Savior Jesus Christ. There never has been a man or woman as "good" as our crucified Lord. His death was the price of our salvation!

Luke and the other three evangelists view the Passion of Christ in the light of Resurrection faith. The sorrowful Passion of the Lord is not the end of the story. Each one of us looks forward through the darkness to the triumph of the Resurrection.

Amen!