

Good Friday Yr A, 14/04/2017
Matt 27:11-54
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Jesus’ suffering and death”

Today is Good Friday. Good Friday is the most solemn day of the church year. We call it good, which is rather ironic, since what happened to Jesus was tragic, evil, and totally unjust. Yet, we call it *Good* Friday because of what Jesus accomplished for you and I, and the entire human race through his suffering and cruellest of deaths on the cross. The colours of black and red are most appropriate for Good Friday. Black reminds us of death, grief, darkness, evil, and the sins of humankind, including your sins and mine, which succeeded in crucifying Jesus. Red reminds us that this Friday is *Good*, since the blood that Jesus shed on the cross succeeded in cleansing us, by atoning for your sins, my sins, and the sins of the whole human race. Ultimately we cannot begin to understand the total meaning of *how* Jesus’ blood atones for sin—all we can do is trust *that* it does, and live with the mystery of it all, forever grateful for how much he loves us as the Saviour of the world.

So with that in mind, let us take a brief look at today’s gospel and be open to what God’s Word has to say to us today, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As the events of the Passion unfold, Jesus is brought before Pilate, the Roman governor for questioning. Jesus’ answer to Pilate as to whether he was King of the Jews is an ironic one. He tells Pilate, “You say so.” The answer is ironic in that at best it was ambiguous rather than a clear-cut ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ One irony in Jesus’ answer is that Pilate is actually admitting Jesus is King of the Jews, so it could mean he would be Jesus’ subject. Another meaning could be that Jesus himself is, in an indirect way, admitting he is King of the Jews, therefore he could be understood as guilty of treason by claiming to be King in opposition to the Roman

emperor, and a political threat to the Romans.

As the questioning continues by some, not all, Jewish leaders making accusations against Jesus, there is silence. Jesus' silence is not a sign of his guilt. Rather, it is a sign of his innocence. When people have made up their minds that someone is guilty, it can become a waste of time to plead innocence, since they are absolutely convinced the person is guilty, even though the facts and the truth support the person's innocence.

In the next scene, Pilate comes across as giving Jesus a chance to go free by offering to release a notorious prisoner, Barabbas. You remember that the Jews were celebrating the Passover, and they came to Jerusalem in large numbers—this made Pilate and the Roman soldiers nervous, because they were worried about the possibility of a riot and rebellion against the Romans. Added to the drama is Pilate's wife, who tells Pilate not to have Jesus killed because she had a dream that he was innocent. Legend has it that Pilate's wife became a Christian. So Pilate, feeling pressured and maybe even threatened by the Jewish crowds, offers to release either Jesus or Barabbas as a gesture of goodwill, and an attempt to pacify the crowds. However, some, not all of the Jewish leaders, and some, not all of the crowds kept yelling out to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus. Pilate, according to Matthew, seems convinced that Jesus is innocent and wants to release him. Thinking that the crowds would start rioting, Pilate gives in and finally releases Barabbas.

In the next scene, Pilate puts on a big show by washing his hands, trying to convince himself and everyone else that he is innocent of Jesus' blood. However, it is he, the Roman authority who decided to have Jesus whipped and handed over to be put to death by crucifixion. The Jewish people present at this scene, according to Matthew say: "His blood be on us and on our children!" Over the centuries, and even to this day, it is tragic that some Christians have used these words to justify hatred of all Jews. Not all the Jews of Jesus' day were responsible for putting Jesus to

death. Jesus himself was a Jew, so if people hate all Jews they are also hating Jesus. Jesus himself loved his own people and we too as followers of Jesus are called to love them, as well as all people, no matter what their nationality may be, because God loves them, and they were created in God's image, just like us.

In the next scene, the Roman soldiers mocked Jesus by stripping him of his clothes and putting a scarlet robe on him. By putting on a scarlet robe, the soldiers mocked Jesus as a would-be king, since the colour of royalty was purple. The crown of thorns and reed or staff were also symbols of royalty, but these ones were meant to humiliate Jesus as a pretender king. If the Roman soldiers only knew who Jesus really was, would they have still mocked him, spat on him, and hit him on the head with the reed? How many people even today still mock and hurl insults at Jesus like those Roman soldiers?

After the Roman soldiers had enough of their hurling insults and mocking Jesus, they led him toward Golgotha, the place of the skull, which at that time was outside the gates and walls of Jerusalem, but today is part of the city. Travelling along the way, Jesus by now was growing weary and most likely in pain from the whipping. The whipping could be so severe that it killed some people. On the end of the whip tassels were sharp bits of bone or metal that could open the skin and cause bleeding as well as be very painful. So the soldiers make a visitor for the Passover who is a bystander in the roadside crowd, Simon of Cyrene, carry Jesus' cross.

In the next scene, Jesus is crucified; the soldiers cast lots and divide his clothing, and then kept watch. This was to fulfill what was written in Psalm twenty-two, as was Jesus' last words from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Crucifixion is a horrible way to die. Tied or nailed to a crossbeam of wood, the condemned person suffered hours and even days of intense pain as the heart grew weak from

pumping the blood that settled in the legs, as the lungs sank onto the diaphragm. The person, who might be unclothed, also suffered from the burning sun, the cold of night, the taunts of spectators, and the insects upon their wounds. If flogged in addition to being crucified, the person would also suffer the weakness of blood loss and the pain of those wounds.¹ Yet Jesus was willing to suffer all of this for your sake and mine, and for the sake of the whole human race.

In addition to the physical suffering and pain on the cross, Jesus suffered from the deriding, taunting and mocking of the passers by, the chief priests, scribes and elders, and in Matthew both of the bandits crucified on each side of Jesus also hurl insults at him. All of this reminds us that as Christians we believe Jesus fulfilled what the prophet wrote concerning the Suffering Servant in Isaiah fifty-three, verse three: “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” And in verse six, yet: “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Such hatred and cruelty of Jesus hurt him even more, right down to the core of his being.

In the closing scenes of the crucifixion, the world is filled with darkness from noon until three o’clock. The darkness symbolizes the sin and evil powers at work to put Jesus to death, as well as being a sign of God’s judgement on the world. Then, when Jesus reaches his lowest moment in life; when the suffering, pain, sin and evil is weighing him down the most; then he feels totally alone and abandoned, and from the depths of his being comes the cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The cry is one of both utter agony and one of faith, even at Jesus’ lowest point; he is able to speak to God the Father. In your lowest point, in my lowest point, all we can do is turn to God and trust in him.

Those who hear it, thinking he is calling for Elijah, misunderstand the cry. A bystander attempts to give Jesus a drink of sour wine from a sponge, perhaps as an act of compassion, or yet another act of cruelty,

attempting to prolong Jesus' suffering and pain. Jesus then gave one last cry before he died.

At that very moment, God acted in a powerful way. The temple curtain, behind which only the high priest could enter once a year into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement; this curtain was torn in two from top to bottom; signifying that now, thanks to the death of Jesus on the cross, you, me, and humankind have direct access to God. Jesus has atoned for our sins. Along with this there was an earthquake, rocks were split, tombs were opened and the bodies of saints were raised to life, and they appeared to many in Jerusalem. The raising to life of these saints was a foreshadowing of what God would do with the body of Jesus on Easter Sunday. This too is a sign of hope that one day we shall share in a resurrection after we die.

Upon seeing all of this, a centurion, who was likely a hardened soldier, is changed into a humble witness—he, an enemy of Jesus, one who participated in the act of putting Jesus to death, now confesses: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Such a witness as this enemy Roman soldier is a reminder that God, through the love of Jesus, can change even the worst enemy into a follower of our Saviour. Love is stronger than hatred.

Speaking of love, in the final scene, Matthew tells us that some of the women followers of Jesus were watching all of this from a distance. When all of Jesus' disciples had fled, there were the women—faithful to the end. May we too, like those women, remain faithful to Jesus to the end—ever grateful for what he has accomplished for us on the cross. Amen!

1 Paul E. Stroble, *Lent 2002 Behold His Cross: A Lenten Study Based on the Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 61.