

Palm Sunday, Year B

The cross of Christ is a fact of history. On a given day in a given place, Jesus of Nazareth was crucified between two thieves. He was nailed to the cross at approximately 9 o'clock in the morning and remained there until about 3 that afternoon. At which time, he was pronounced dead and placed in a tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea.

A few moments ago, we read Mark's account of this historical event. All of the other three Gospels tell the same story. Each writer gives slightly different details, but the big picture is constant - at a place called Calvary just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, by the decree of a Roman governor named Pilate, Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross.

You and I have heard that story so many times and know it so well, that anyone of us could recite it from memory. But it happened so long ago and so far away, that we might well wonder what, if anything, it has to do with our lives today. Is it not true that across the history many people have died innocently, courageously, and sacrificially? So, why do we focus on the cross of Christ? What has his dying got to do with our living?

Perhaps it seems irreverent to even raise such a question, but let me point out that the first followers of Jesus struggled with the same issue. They knew very well the historical fact of Jesus cross. Many of them had witnessed it with their own eyes; and at first they could see it as nothing but an unspeakable tragedy. They were shocked, horrified, and traumatized by the cruel insanity of his death. Then before the shock of his crucifixion had worn off, they experienced another shock - his resurrection. Slowly it dawned upon them that he had risen from the dead and was alive forever. But even then, they could not forget the way he died.

That cross had cast a spell on their lives; and the longer they thought about it, the more personal it became. At first they saw it as a criminal act committed by the religious and political authorities. But then they began to see it as something in which they, themselves, were involved; and finally they found themselves saying that it was because of and for them that he had died. This to them was an overwhelming fact, as it ought to be for you and me.

Consider first what the cross says about the true nature of sin. Most of the time we do our best to play down our sins and treat them as if they hardly matter. We rationalize, we excuse, we explain. But just as soon as we face the fact that someone else pays the price for them, that someone else dies because of them, then our sins take on a totally different meaning. I fail to see how anyone could make light of anything that makes another person suffer because of us. And that is exactly what sin does.

Think, for a moment, of the work of Father Bruce Ritter, Franciscan friar who died in 1999. His mission was to rescue young people from the ravages of prostitution, pornography, and drugs at Minnesota Strip in New York City. Many of them were only children. They come by the thousands from every state in the US. Why were they there? What mysterious force draws them to that particular location?

The answer is that they were there to pay for the sins of a few greedy men, who want to make as much money as they could, as fast as they could and do not care how they make it. They were there to pay for the sins of travelers, who go to the city to have a good time and do not care how they have it. They were there to pay for the sins of people all over the US and around the world, whose disgusting appetites create a market for pornography. Many of them were there to pay for the sins of parents back

home, who did not have the time or the interest to see what was happening to their children.

Sin, when seen in a true light, is a serious matter. But it needs not to be as disgusting and dramatic, as that we have just described, for the same principal to apply. Instead of greed and lust, it may be only a father and husband who is ill - tempered at home. Surely, that is not so serious. Well, we would not attempt to compare it with the sins of the Minnesota Strip, but you can be certain that someone else is paying the price. Someone sneaks around. Someone tries to calm him down. Someone waits, and worries, and wonders what his mood will be when he comes home from work. And it well may be, that some children, will carry the emotional scars of that ill - temper throughout the rest of their lives.

How can we ever excuse our selfish, unclean, and unfaithful living? It would be bad enough, if we could keep the consequences to ourselves; but that is impossible. The cross is a vivid reminder that someone else pays the price for our sins.

The second truth involved in the cross strikes an altogether different note. The first is bad news, but the good news is that there are people who are willing to pay the price for our sins. That is what Jesus did. The cross was not forced upon him. He accepted it freely. Many things went into the making of that cross. The pride and prejudice of the scribes and Pharisees were a part of it. The expedience and ambition of Pilate played a part. The weakness of his disciples was involved. In a real sense, the sins of the whole world clustered around that cross. All of it rolled upon him, and he voluntarily paid the price.

He led the way; others have followed. There are actually people in this world, which will take upon themselves the burden of the world guilt and lay down their lives for it. This is a kind of goodness that goes far beyond anything anyone could expect; yet there are such people.

When those early disciples saw the cross in this light, it overwhelmed them. They were utterly amazed. The cross was a strange paradox. On the one hand, it revealed the very worst in human life - the dreadful consequence of our sins on the innocent. Yet at the same time, it reveals the very best in human life - that spirit of sacrificial goodness that voluntarily assumes the burden of our guilt and pays the price to save us from it.

We are facing a fact of life. In this world, nothing ever really gets changed and no one ever really gets saved until someone, who doesn't have to, freely puts his life on the line. Christ did that, and many others since have shared his cross.

Everything in our lives, personal and social, has come to us through such sacrifice. Surely the outgrowth of that is an abiding gratitude that would make us willing to do the same for someone else. No room for pride now; no room for selfishness. Someone has died for our sins. All, that we can do in return is quietly and gratefully take up our cross and follow him. The cross, my friends, is a fact of life. **Amen.**