

Homily for Good Friday 2010

The Rev John A. Baldwin

There were 3 crosses on top of Golgotha outside Jerusalem's city gates on that "Good Friday long ago. All four Gospels speak of a threesome of condemned man executed by the Roman authorities for crimes against the state. Two are described as "robbers" by Matthew and Mark, and "criminals" by Luke. The third, Jesus of Nazareth was (take your pick) a "blasphemer", a "political threat to Rome", a "sacrificial victim", a "casualty of crowd hatred."

The focus of the Passion Narratives is on the cross in the center. Mark describes a sign over that cross proclaiming "This is the King of the Jews". This sign evokes laughs of contempt from the witnesses standing around the cross, as well as reviling words from one of those nailed to another cross. "If you are such a superstar, what are you doing up on a cross?"

Crucifixion is a cruel and horrible way to die, dreamed up by the Romans to totally humiliate their victims. The condemned hang naked, exposed and vulnerable up on the cross. Anyone can come up and hurl abuse. The sun beats down upon them leading to terrible pangs of thirst. To stave off suffocating as their bodies hang from the cross, the condemned must push themselves up with their legs for as long as their lower bodily strength endures. When the guards get bored with waiting for death to occur, their legs are broken to hasten the end. There is nothing pretty about what happens on the top of Golgotha.

We remember on this Good Friday the nobility with which our Lord Jesus Christ concluded his time on Earth. The one who loves us with a holy passion across the years and in our hearts today passed from life to death with forgiveness, compassion for others, and love for his heavenly Father on his lips and tongue.

What had until this moment been a symbol of brutality and hatred, the cross, becomes for us across the millennium a symbol for the triumph of love and grace over sin and death. We wear that cross around our necks, the cross at the center of the hill, as a reminder that the worst that can be devised to humiliate and destroy human beings has been overcome by the love of God in Jesus Christ.

But what do we learn from the crosses on the left and the right of Jesus? Luke records that one of the criminals reviles Jesus with these words, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" The robber on the other side, however, rebukes the first. "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then turning his head to the cross in the center, he adds, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power."

Which of the 3 crosses did Jesus have in mind do you suppose when he said to his disciples, "Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

Surely not the one of the left, the cross of the robber who challenges Jesus to climb down off the cross and rescue the three of them. His words are strangely reminiscent of the Tempter in the Wilderness. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple for it is written, "He will give the angels charge of you to guard you, lest you strike a foot against a stone." The words from the cross on the left, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" are mocking, challenging, doubting, provocative. "Are you the Messiah? Really? Prove it."

The cross on the left is occupied by those who become desperate, bitter, despairing at the approach of death; who lash out at the unfairness of it all with those well known words, "Why me God?"; who plead with God to rescue them from drinking the rancid dregs of death, but who in the face of suffering really don't believe, trust, hope surrender. This cross is still the symbol of the Romans and the one adopted by the hateful ones of our world like the KKK. It is not the cross our Lord asks us to pick up and carry.

The cross in the center, on the other hand, is a unique and one-time cross. It is the battleground upon which good and evil, love and hatred, forgiveness and vengeance, battle with each other in a ferocious combat for all of eternity. Do you imagine that the soul of Jesus was not battered and bruised? The inner torment leaks out in the words, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") Jesus endures that onslaught of the powers of darkness for every one of us, once and for all. We are not asked to climb up onto that cross. That is the cross of Jesus alone. Thanks be to God for his goodness and mercy in hanging on that cross for you and me!

No, the cross we are asked to carry is the cross on the right...the one belonging to the robber who says, "Jesus remember me when you come in your kingly power." This robber is one who recognizes, accepts, and confesses the wrongs he has done in life; who doesn't complain in bitterness about his lot in life, pass the buck, or berate the Lord. In acceptance of his pain and suffering, he gives his heart and soul to God. "Jesus remember me." Jesus extends his love and compassion to the thief on the right, as he does to all of us who love God with the assurance, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

This is the cross we are asked to carry. It's the cross of salvation, leading to life beyond life in the glory of God.