

Good Friday Liturgy

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Introductory note: Fr. Stephen Privett, S.J., was invited by Bishop William Swing of the Episcopal Diocese of California and Dean Alan Jones of Grace Cathedral to deliver the homily at the Good Friday liturgy.

I am grateful to Bishop Swing and Dean Alan Jones for inviting me to celebrate this liturgy with you. This is Grace Cathedral and you are a graced presence in the city of San Francisco. I do not feel like a visitor here but as a fellow traveler, grateful to you for this opportunity to pause on our common journey, to come aside awhile and pray with you in this assembly of the People of God.

The reading just proclaimed (Isaiah 52:13 — 53:12) is the fourth of the so-called Suffering Servant songs. The subject of these songs is at best elusive. We do not know if the author is writing about an historical figure or the people of Israel; whether this is a poetic desire for a new world order or a literary device to explore the mystery of suffering.

We do know that the early followers of Jesus were faced with the horrible dilemma of having been moved by this Rabbi as nothing had ever before moved them, and then watching him and all he offered them crash and burn in 24 hours. They were devastated by their cowardice and the betrayal, condemnation, torture, and execution of this man who would be God, this self-proclaimed Messiah, this most unregal claimant to the throne of Heaven and Earth. How could they believe in a Messiah who cannot save himself from the pain and humiliation of abandonment, ridicule, torture, and a most public and agonizing death? The death of God is more than a summary phrase for a trendy theology from the 1970s. It is a stumbling block for us all. I can hear echoes of my own hope in that taunting challenge, "save yourself and come down from the cross."

Like the first disciples, I, too, long for a Messiah who makes sense, who meets my expectations. As a new university president, I want a God who balances budgets, erases deficits, lowers housing costs, doubles endowments, and inspires wealthy benefactors to lavish their generosity on the Jesuit University of San Francisco. Less selfishly, I want a Messiah who "comes down from the cross" to triumph over evil, whose goodness and compassion rule the universe. I want a Messiah — a God — who heals our sufferings and ends our tragedies and eases our pain. I want a God who wreaks havoc on evildoers, who levels the mountains of injustice and makes straight the path to food, shelter, education, and health care, a God whose justice rolls down like a mighty stream. That is the God our world needs.

In the Suffering Servant song proclaimed today, the substance of the narrative is "book-ended" between an opening assertion that God's servant "shall prosper and be exalted and lifted up" and a concluding reassurance that the servant "shall see light and find satisfaction and share the portion of the great and the strong." Now that's what I want to hear. That's a Messiah — a God -- who makes sense. It's all the stuff between the bookends that causes me to tremble:

"repulsive in appearance...despised and rejected ... a person of suffering...racked by disease...struck down and afflicted...of no account...wounded, crushed, punished, bruised, oppressed... cut off from the land of the living...silently slaughtered and buried with the wicked."

In the context of today's liturgy, the suffering servant alludes to Jesus. If that were all there is to it, this would be the day we set aside to celebrate another one of our own who brought life and hope to untold thousands of people and was murdered for it. We would sing of Jesus, as we do of Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln. But Calvary is not Memphis or Ford's Theatre. Calvary is unique. Unique because the one who was murdered there was indeed a human being and more. The person who died on Calvary was the Second Person of a Blessed Trinity of Persons.

The one who died on Calvary was God made flesh and dwelling among us. Not visiting us, the way I visited Haiti -- to broaden my experience of human misery and steep myself in the resilience of the human spirit. But Emanuel — God with us -- God entering completely and deeply into the muck and the mire of our human condition — for you and me -- certainly not for God's sake. God with us not as King of Kings and Lord of Hosts but as one who is meek and humble of heart with no where to lay his head. He learned as we learned; knowledge made its bloody entrance. He loved as we love, in the face of misunderstanding, disappointment, and betrayal. He tasted salty tears of sorrow and joy. Surges of anger and waves of fear wracked his body. He cast his lot with the scarred and the seared, the lonely and the broken. He sweated blood and prayed that his hour would pass without his having to pay the price of his convictions.

In a word, Jesus is the personification of God's desire to be one of us, one with us. Even for God, especially for God, "love is stronger than death...and greater love than this no one has..." Could not Jesus have died in bed with dignity? Why breathe his last in bloody disgrace, mocked by the very world for which he was dying? The short answer is, "I don't know."

I do know what parents do out of love for their children; the depth of self-sacrifice that spouses and partners offer each other; the steep personal price that one friend happily pays for the well being of the other. In *The Sands of Dunkirk*, the author describes how Surgeon-Lieutenant Richard Pembrey wept as he watched a dying soldier strip off his own blanket and place it across the shivering body of a pneumonia-stricken comrade in the next bunk. Ours is not the God of arid theological textbooks, sitting placidly above it all, hard as flint, all perfect and unchanging, but a shivering self-giving God who loves you and me without limit even to laying down his life for us.

Ours is the God of Calvary. Ours is the God of the emergency room, the AIDS hospice, the death watch at San Quentin, the homeless shelter in the Tenderloin, the broken family; the God of failed relationships, fragile bodies, and shattered hearts. This is why Friday is "Good." God has been and remains in our darkest places, even in the places where we are sure God is absent. Can anyone match the simple but profound final words of Betsie Ten Boom, who was beaten to death by a guard in the Ravensbruck concentration camp? "We must tell the people," she whispered, "what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God

is not deeper still."

The struggles and failures and death of Jesus are a profound affirmation of our own struggles and failures and deaths in the messiness of our ordinary lives. Because of Jesus, our suffering savior, we may give ourselves completely over in the face of our darkest moments, even in the face of our own death, to a God who has gone there before us and somehow draws grace out of senselessness. If our Good Fridays cry out for an Easter Sunday, Easter Sunday is the culmination of our Good Fridays, or as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade and
mortal trash fall to the residuary worm;
World's wildfire, leave but ash;
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was
what I am, and this Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch,
matchwood,
immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond."