

Father Joe Donnelly
Sacred Heart Church
Southbury, CT U.S.A.

THERE IS MORE THAN WHAT WE SEE – Part II: THE PUBLIC EXECUTION

As we continue our reflection together during this three-day Sacred Triduum this afternoon we are invited to move past the Supper and the walk across the Kidron Valley, through both the Jewish and the Roman trials, through Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal to the hill of Calvary just outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. Jewish religious law dictated that capital punishment and all burials take place outside the walls of the holy city, even if the execution ordered for pseudo-religious purposes. Apparently while they could somehow justify executing someone, they did not feel it was appropriate to do in God's holy city.

But Jesus' execution is more than just another savage example of capital punishment. In order to appreciate what it means for our faith life we must once again use our God-given gift of reflection which I referred to last night to contemplate the meal. St. Ignatius Loyola in his masterpiece *The Spiritual Exercises* encourages the retreatant to contemplate Jesus on the Cross for a week of the thirty day retreat. The goal is to better appreciate what Jesus suffered for our sins and what his suffering really meant.

As we discovered again last evening about the Eucharist and humble service, the cross is also an essential part of our faith. There is a temptation

in all of us to soft-pedal the cross. It is not the most attractive dimension of our faith. One revered theologian characterized Christianity without the cross or Christianity-lite as: “A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministry of Jesus without the cross.” When we contemplate Jesus especially today we realize that we do not have the luxury of such a facsimile of Christian faith. Like that great American philosopher Huckleberry Finn put it, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bothers me. It’s the parts I do understand.” And we understand the cross is an essential and inevitable part of what we paradoxically call the “good news” of Jesus.

As we reflect prayerfully on the cross of Jesus whether in our Little Black Books throughout Lent or at the Faith Walk this morning or at this Commemoration of the Lord’s Passion this afternoon we might try to understand what are the feelings that Jesus, like us in all ways except sin, felt on Good Friday. Years ago there was a book written by a physician entitled “A Doctor at Calvary” in which the author describes in great and gory detail Jesus’ physical suffering and death on the cross. But the gospels do not focus much attention on Jesus’ physical sufferings which must have been horrific. What the Gospel writers highlight instead is his emotional suffering and his humiliation. Jesus is presented as lonely, betrayed, alone, helpless to explain himself, a victim of religious rivalry and jealousy, morally isolated, mocked, misunderstood, stripped naked so as to feel embarrassment and shame, and yet in all this, as clinging to goodness, forgiveness and faithfulness.

What does that feel like? One current spiritual writer has put it this way:

- “Whenever we find ourselves outside the circle of health and vibrancy, on a sick bed alone, with sure knowledge that, despite the love and support of family and friends, in the end it is us, by ourselves, who face disability and disfigurement, who have to lose a breast or an organ to surgery, who face chemotherapy and maybe death, when we are alone inside of that experience, alone inside of fear, we are feeling what Jesus felt on Good Friday.
- Whenever we find ourselves alone inside duty, bound by moral claims we cannot explain, tied down in our freedom so as to be seen as too timid, too frigid, too afraid to pick up our own lives, when innocence and duty are seen as a weakness, when circumstance steals away our dreams and what we would want for ourselves we need to give to others, we are feeling what Jesus felt on Good Friday.
- Whenever we are misunderstood and because of that made to look weak, bad, or wrong, when we have to live with misunderstanding that makes us look bad in the eyes of others, we are feeling what Jesus felt on Good Friday.
- Whenever we find ourselves the object of jealousy, animosity and threat because of what we believe in, when what is virtue in us is made to look like selfishness, when we are made to feel shame for what we believe in, when what is precious to us is deemed offensive to others, we are feeling what Jesus felt on Good Friday.
- Whenever we find ourselves alone and lost, before aging, before the loss of health, before the loss of physical attractiveness and our former place in life, and before the loss of life itself, we are feeling

the loneliness of dying and we are feeling what Jesus felt on Good Friday.

- Whenever we have been unfairly made to be a victim, when we are made to carry someone else's sickness, we are feeling what Jesus felt at Calvary and we are tasting the darkness of Good Friday."

But even more amazing and awesome than the suffering of Jesus is the truth that Jesus did not have to do it. Old, inaccurate and frightening explanations of why Jesus died spoke of Jesus dying this way in order to satisfy God's wrath. Such explanations always leave even people of faith asking "How could a Parent do that to their child?" "Do I want to believe in, let alone love, a God like that?"

Jesus death is only explained by the love of Jesus for His Father and for all of us, a love that shows itself in sacrifice. Not that sacrifice and suffering are good in themselves. They are not. But all love, worthy of that term, demands sacrifice. Any faithfulness and service of others demands sacrifice. Jesus became more fully aware of that as he suffered on Good Friday. Any of us who become aware that we truly love someone else will discover that same truth as well. True faithful love always entails sacrifice. True love is not a feeling, but a decision which will always entail some type of sacrifice of self for love of the beloved.

Jesus' death today is an extension of the same humble loving service that we reflected upon in his washing of the apostles' feet last night. And it is memorialized each time we gather to celebrate of the Eucharist. It reminds us that such love is not an option for his disciples, but an expectation. This

type of love will always seem and sound “radical” to those who keep others at a distance, those who live in a world centered on themselves or their own needs or those who can excuse unfaithfulness in relationship. It will always seem and sound “radical” to those who view reality and other people in terms of male or female, black or white, right or wrong, gay or straight, liberal or conservative, us or them. But for those who prayerfully reflect upon Jesus’ life, passion and death, his suffering and sacrifice will speak eloquently and profoundly of the meaning of true love.

You see, Jesus’ death on the cross was more than a public execution. It was an act of love.