

GOOD FRIDAY HOMILY

“The Transforming Power of Suffering Love”

(Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9; Jn 18:1-19:42)

In an African village, a woman was raped one Sunday morning as she went for water. The following Sunday the whole village gathered at the spot. Forming a circle they walked in silence around and around the place where she had been assaulted, following two women playing a heart-beat rhythm on their drums. The movement stopped. A stone was passed to each person in the group and they were asked to speak their feelings or prayers and to breathe them into the stone. Animated by their collective spirit, the stone was buried. There was healing, purification and commitment to freedom and human dignity in the air and in the earth. This story from Corbin Eddy sets the tone for our Good Friday celebration.

Are we not doing something like that today, though in a very different way because the story is different? he goes on to ask. Jesus was not being raped or murdered. He was giving his life for the life of the world, and, risen from the dead, continues to breathe his Spirit upon the world even today.

In a few moments, we will carry a cross into this place of assembly, a sign not of death, but of the promise of eternal life in Christ’s sacrifice. “This is the wood of the cross” will be proclaimed, to which you will reply, “Come, let us worship.” One by one, we will approach it to venerate it – some by bowing or by kissing it, others just by touching. Yes, we will breathe our own faith into it, or rather, it will breathe faith into us.

As we do so, we are invited to see the cross as a blessing. The Cross is all about the transforming power of suffering love.

It takes two pieces of wood to make a cross. That is important for us today, as we celebrate Good Friday and venerate the cross.

The vertical arm could represent God’s love for us. God so loved the world that he sent his only son to die for us. Beaten, scorned, laughed at, ridiculed, tortured - he accepted it all out of love for us. He took upon himself all our sins. He, the Lamb of God; he, the High Priest, willingly suffered for us to free us from the consequences of our own sins.

Ron Rolheiser, in his Lenten reflections, has a poignant reflection on Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, a central piece in the Christian notion of salvation. He states that Jesus took away sin by absorbing and transforming sin. How?

The image he uses is that of a water filter. A filter takes in impure water, holds the impurities inside of itself, and gives back only pure water. It transforms rather than transmits. We see this in Jesus. Like the ultimate cleansing filter he purifies life itself. He takes in hatred, holds it, transforms it, and gives back love; he takes in fear, holds it, transforms it, and gives back freedom; he takes in jealousy, holds it, transforms it, and

gives back affirmation; he takes in Satan and murder, holds them, transforms them, and gives back only God and forgiveness. At its core, genuine love is forgiveness.

And, in doing this, Jesus doesn't want admirers, but imitators. He doesn't want fans, but followers. The Garden of Gethsemane invites us, every one of us, to help absorb, purify and transform tension and sin rather than simply transmit them. Such is the love of God for us revealed in Jesus' suffering on the cross. Such was the instinctive gesture of the African village in their Sunday morning healing circle.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a good example of this kind of suffering faithful love. She stands at the foot of the cross, not giving in to despair, not trying frantically to stop the execution of her innocent son, but rather just being there, taking it all in, holding it, pondering it, believing and trusting that somehow, God would turn even this parody of justice into something positive, and we know that God did. The Garden of Gethsemane, and the Cross, invites us to be like Mary, to transform evil into hope and forgiveness.

The unconditional love of Jesus on the cross is the foundation for the sacraments of the Church. His suffering is the source of eternal salvation for us. His body, broken for us on the cross; his blood, poured forth for us on the cross, become for us now the bread of life and the new wine of salvation in the Eucharist. The water that poured forth from his side becomes for us the font of Baptism that joins us to him and opens for us the way into his kingdom even now, in this life.

According to the papal preacher, Fr. CantaleMESSA, this love shines in the highest degree in the mystery of the cross. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," Jesus said in the Cenacle (John 15:13). One could exclaim: a love does exist, O Christ, which is greater than giving one's life for one's friends. Yours! You did not give your life for your friends, but for your enemies! Paul says "one will hardly die for the righteous man -- though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us".

However, it does not take long to discover that the contrast is only apparent. The word "friends" in the active sense indicates those who love you, but in the passive sense it indicates those who are loved by you. Jesus calls Judas "friend" (Matthew 26:50) not because Judas loved him, but because He loved Judas! There is no greater love than to give one's life for enemies, considering them friends: this is the meaning of Jesus' phrase. Men can be enemies of God, but God will never be able to be an enemy of man. It is the terrible advantage of children over fathers (and mothers).

The founder of the Oblates, Eugene de Mazenod, truly understood the message of the cross as God's love. One Good Friday while he was looking at the feet of Jesus on the cross and praying, he was overcome by the love of God and shed tears. Then and there he determined to follow Jesus more closely. He ended up becoming a priest and bishop and founding our religious congregation, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The horizontal arm represents God's call for us to love one another. It is our response to God's love in Jesus, and completes the cross. There are two horizontal arms to the cross, and two ways that we can love one another.

The first way is through relationships. God's greatest hurt is our broken brotherhood. How important - indeed, essential it is that we learn to love, forgive and accept one another. Otherwise, our religion and professed belief is a sham. How can we claim to love God, yet go on being rude to each other; take advantage of each other; accuse each other; put each other down; gossip about each other; suspect each other; avoid each other; stay away from gatherings because of our aversion to and fear of each other? Have we not yet learned the most basic truth of our faith; that what we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to Jesus? Yes, one arm of the cross is relationships; how we get along with each other is the measure of our relationship with God.

The second arm of the cross is service. God's message through the cross is that we must serve one another. Jesus spoke clearly about that when he said that if anyone wants to be his disciple, they must take up their cross and follow him. It is not easy to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others, but that is what the cross means. Jesus showed us what it means by accepting to die on the cross for us. The bottom line of following Jesus is that we must let go of our hunger for power, control and glory, and learn to serve one another, to wash each other's feet each day as we did on Holy Thursday.

Again Mary our mother in faith is a good example for us. Her complete trust in God; her caring for her cousin Elizabeth even though she herself was pregnant; her flight to Egypt as a refugee; her sensitivity to the young couple getting married at Cana; her devotion to Jesus and Joseph; her dedication to the early community of believers - all speak loudly of one who lived the message of the cross in her life, and who invites us always to "do whatever he tells you."

Someone who truly lived this dimension of the cross was Mother Theresa of Calcutta. A frail, humble nun in India who picked up the dying to give them dignity, she cared nothing for the riches and honours of the world, though she was given the Nobel Peace prize some years ago. She turned most gifts to her into raffle prizes to help the poor. She had a special concern for the unborn, the unwanted children, and the dying poor. Kings and princes respected her and bowed in her presence, yet she had nothing. Truly, she was living the mystery of the cross with peace and joy in her heart, and attracted hundreds of followers.

As we continue to celebrate today, let us pray that we may have a stronger and stronger faith in the power and depth of God's transformative love for us, and that we may respond to that love by learning to truly love each other from the heart, through loving relationships and humble service.