

Passion Sunday – 2007

Have you ever had someone who was not a Christian come up to you & ask, "Why is it that you Christians have the cross as the main symbol of your faith? Why would you want an instrument of torture & suffering & death to be the sign of who you are & what you believe?" ... Good question. Maybe some of us have wondered the same thing ourselves ... Every time we hear or see or read the story of our Lord's Passion –as we just did - we can't help but connect the cross with unspeakable pain & suffering & death...And we also connect it with some of the darkest kinds of human behavior : hatred, betrayal, cruelty, mockery....& some of the most agonizing human feelings: fear, humiliation, rejection, abandonment.

Several years ago, the parish staff decided to have the large crucifix visibly displayed all year round – not just during Lent....Shortly afterward, a parishioner came up to me after Mass & told me he didn't like it...He said that we focused too much on the cross. When we walk into church we shouldn't be hit in the face with this beaten, bloody body hanging on a piece of wood - it's too depressing. We should see instead signs of the Resurrection, new life, new hope - that's what our Christian faith is all about. So how do we answer them? What do we say to those people who want us to downplay the cross? Well, one standard answer is that the cross is so important to us because without it, we wouldn't have had Easter; Easter happened only because Good Friday happened first. For Christ to rise from the dead, he had to first be dead. ...This makes sense, but it doesn't explain why He had to die the kind of death He died. Why couldn't Jesus have lived 30, 40 or 50 more years & just died naturally - maybe died in His sleep? ... Well, here's my answer.

When I look at the cross - when I meditate on the cross - what I see & feel radiating from that dreadful image is plainly & simply: LOVE ... perfect, undeserved, divine love. Now I'm not saying that when I gaze upon the cross that I block out all of those other painful & agonizing images...It's those images - long since burned into my memory - that bring me to realize the awesomeness of God's love for me, for each one of us & for the world. St. John the evangelist put it in those immortal words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" His only Son.

Every man, woman, & child who ever drew a breath, from the most saintly person to the most evil, can echo the words of St. Paul: "...the Son of God loved me & gave himself for me." ...Just say that over & over. He loved me & gave himself for me ... For me ... me, with all my weaknesses; with all of my faults & all my sins ...

And this is what utterly amazes me. God has every reason to let me & you – all of us - suffer the consequences of our selfishness, our sinfulness - every reason, except one: He loves us too much to give us what we deserve...Now I don't know WHY He loves us this way: without any conditions - without any limits. But I do know that He does...because the cross tells me so...You see, if Jesus had gone on teaching, preaching & healing for 30, 40 or 50 more years, it wouldn't have been enough to show us the depth of God's love. Somehow there had to be suffering & sacrifice - not ours, but God's, through the suffering & sacrifice of His Son.

It is the cross - more than anything else - that shows us the immensity of God's love. From that cross, God cries out to every human being – the rich & the poor, the joyful & the suffering, the faithful & the alienated, the good & the wicked – to every one of us: "See how I love you. Do you understand NOW how much I love you? Can you ever again doubt my love for you?"

And so, my friends, whenever you ever get to feeling that God can't possibly love you because you've messed up your life: "There's no way God could love me; I don't even love myself." ... Or when you're in so much pain, so much hurt, that you're thinking : "God doesn't love me; if He did He wouldn't let all this happen to me." ... Whenever you get to feeling God has stopped loving you, that He's not there for you, then look - look at the cross & fix your eyes on Jesus, on our crucified Savior & try to say to Him, "You don't love me ... You don't love me" ... You can't ... You can't say it ... Instead you'll find yourself saying ... You ... DO love me ... You do love ... ME."

Being loved this much has to make a difference in our lives - it has to. Being loved this much has to make us realize we are better than we think we are,...has to make us realize we are important to God, important to God's plan for the world...And so, as God looks down at us from the cross with eyes that are both loving & pleading, let our hearts listen to & follow His words, ... "See how I love you ... now go & do the same...Love one another as I love you." ...AMEN.