

## Palm/Passion Sunday – 2009

The story we just heard proclaimed is one we know all too well...A good & innocent man who's been preaching, healing, & helping people ...is betrayed by a friend, ...dragged before a kangaroo court - that sentences Him to death...Then He has the snot beaten out of Him,...His back ripped open by lashes from a metal-studded whip...He's stripped naked, crowned with thorns,... nailed to a cross & hung in the air so a crowd can jeer at Him & insult Him as His body is slowly & painfully drained of life...Yes, we know the story well. ...So well, sometimes, that it may not impact us the way it should...Oh, we feel bad for the pain & agony JESyous went thru for us...& we're certainly grateful that He took upon Himself the guilt of all our sins for our ETERNAL salvation,...but do we ever think about what it means here & now?

One day not too long ago, I decided to pray my morning prayer here in the church...here before the crucifix,...here at the foot of the Cross...As I looked up at Jesus during my prayer, I seemed to focus not so much on His beaten, broken body...but more so on His eyes....Those eyes that say so much,...that speak to us so passionately...those eyes that look down from the cross & seem to say, "See how much I love you...Can you ever, ever doubt how much I love you?"...I remembered what St. Paul said in his Letter to the Galatians: "The Son of God loved me & gave up His life for me." Everyone of us can echo these words...from the saintliest saint to the sinningest sinner...Everyone of us.

If we ever get to feeling that He can't possibly love us...that we messed up our life so badly, ..that we're a no good, lousy sinner who doesn't deserve His love...If we ever feel that He doesn't love us, that He's not there for us, ...we need to look up at that figure on the cross...look right into those eyes & try to say to Him..."You don't love me, Jesus...you don't love me."...We can't say it...we can't. ...Instead, we'll find ourselves saying," you do love me...you do ...luv...ME."

Or if we ever feel that things in our life are going so badly....that we've been hit with so much trouble & pain that we just want to yell out,... " OK Jesus, if you really loved me, why are you letting this happen...Why are you letting me suffer like this?"...Whenever we feel that He doesn't care about us, that He's turned His back on us,...we need to look up at that cross...look into those understanding eyes that say to us, "I know what you are going through...I've been there. ...I know your pain,... your anguish. ...I know your feeling of hopelessness...your feeling that no one cares about you... I've been there...I'm not going to tell you it will be easy...It won't...But you are not alone...If you trust the Father - as I did – He will help you through it & everything will turn out right."

As I prayed in front of this crucifix that morning,...I recalled a very powerful experience that a deacon classmate once shared with a bunch of his fellow DITs – deacons in training...You might have heard me tell Greg's story before, but it's one that needs retelling...It's about the summer he had spent in Washington, DC interning at a hospital run by the religious order of nuns founded by Mother Teresa....The hospital is primarily for AIDS patients in the end stages of the disease. ....In his time there, Greg had witnessed his share of agonizing deaths... But there was one patient - a young man - whose death made an especially deep impression on him. ....This patient had contracted AIDS thru sharing drug needles & a promiscuous lifestyle....He was a baptized Christian, but he wanted nothing to do with religion or with prayers, and he angrily rejected every offer of the missionary sisters to pray over him or with him.

As the young man's condition worsened and his emaciated body became covered with sores and racked with pain, he grew even more belligerent.... He would curse and shout obscenities whenever the nuns or Greg tried to talk to him about the saving love of Jesus or tried to read to him from the Bible.... As far as he was concerned, he had made a terrible mess of his life, and there was no way God could have any use for him - if there even was a God.... ...But the little nuns would not give up... When the young man lapsed into a coma they brought candles and a crucifix into his dark room and began to pray over him.... When his breathing became more and more labored,... one of the sisters held the cross over his forehead, &, as Greg described it,... the light from the candles cast the shadow of the crucifix across the dying man's face.... As Greg & the sisters continued to pray,...suddenly, the man's eyes opened, and he found himself looking into the eyes of the suffering Jesus....Then drawing on his last ounce of energy, he reached for the cross, pulled it close to his breast,... and taking one final breath, he uttered his last words - "My Lord and my God."...That dying young man – in his final moment – was granted one last look into the eyes of His crucified Savior - & in those eyes, he had seen, had felt – perhaps for the very 1<sup>st</sup> time - the love that had been there all along. AMEN.