

The Cross of Christ
Mt. 27:27-51, 54
Good Friday, April 6, 2007

I.

Today we have come from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. We began Lent in a somber and penitent way, and reaffirmed on that evening six weeks ago that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. And we also recited a lengthy litany of penitence, including recognition of the pride, hypocrisy and impatience of our lives, and our self-indulgent ways.

That was a sobering message at the time. It placed our mortal and sinful nature squarely before us. Six weeks later we now are standing before the cross on what is a solemn and mournful day of the church year.

But it also is a day in which we recognize the greatest gift that God ever gave to us, apart from life itself. Today the dust of our mortality of Ash Wednesday has given way to the hope for eternal life. Today the sins we proclaimed with crosses of ashes on our foreheads have been washed away by the blood of Christ on the real cross.

And most of us have some understanding of that. The New Testament is full of teachings that we have been saved from sin and death through Christ's death and resurrection. It is the core of our faith and the foundation for all that we understand about Christianity.

But is that understanding of our Christian hope enough? Are there times, such as today, when an unspoken question starts to move from the back of our minds to the front? Are there times when we also ask ourselves if it really was necessary for Jesus to die?

II.

Why did Jesus have to die? Wasn't there another way? Why couldn't God just have forgiven everybody? He could have forgiven Adam and Eve. He could have forgiven the disobedient Israelites. He could have forgiven the pagans and their idol worship. And surely he could have forgiven us. After all, we aren't that bad, are we?

Or maybe God could have treated us like we treat our own children. When our kids do something wrong we discipline them, we say "let that be a lesson to you," and then we go forward without dwelling on it. Couldn't God have done something like that? Couldn't he just have disciplined us and then let us start over with a clean slate?

No, it could not have happened that way. There is more to the story. With God it is different. Let me explain.

Although we are children of God, and we begin the Lord's Prayer by saying "Our Father who art in heaven," the relationship between God and humanity is very different from the relationships between ourselves and our children.

We usually discipline our children for their own good, rather than for ourselves. We discipline them so they can learn, not so we can feel better or have some sense of our own holiness recognized. That's because we might not be especially holy at times.

And we also can look at how our children might frustrate us, but we remember our own childhoods and we can at least relate to the situations. We might even inwardly grin at something they might have done, although we would never let them see that. Said another way, because we are sinners, we can have a sense of understanding of the sins of others, even though we might disapprove.

For God it is different. Unlike us, God is holy and perfect, and cannot associate with our sins. God cannot even relate to our sins. God's holiness is completely and utterly incompatible with our sinfulness. He cannot abide the presence of sinners because to do so would be unjust. God cannot reward wickedness with eternal blessings.

Our fallen nature is so far removed from him that our disobedience results in a complete and total separation from God. He does not and cannot have compassion for our sins, and he does not and cannot look aside and chuckle or wink at our mischief.

The bottom line is that for God to even tolerate sin would be to compromise his holiness. Let me repeat that. For God to even tolerate sin would be to compromise his holiness. That is a key theological concept.

In the Old Testament God's only response to sin was wrath or forbearance, but not forgiveness. In the Garden of Eden God could not overlook the fall of humanity. Later, he could not overlook Israel's idolatry. In order to preserve God's righteousness and holiness, he brought forth consequences for what humanity had done.

III.

And by this time, two thousand years ago, humanity had really dug itself into a big hole with God, and the hole was just getting bigger and deeper.

At the time of Christ's birth the world really was in a mess in terms of being separated from God. Humanity was spinning out of control. Spiritually, the world was worse than it is now.

The disobedience of God's chosen people, the Israelites, had begun under Solomon nine hundred years earlier. That disobedience led them to struggle under the boot of foreign domination for seven hundred years. Parts of Jewish worship had been corrupted and the unity of the Jewish people had become fragmented with sectarian agendas. Rome ruled and dominated the known world with no sense whatsoever of honoring God. People regularly engaged in pagan practices and idolatry was everywhere. Just about every kind of sin imaginable was evident with virtually no religious, moral, or ethical infrastructure to moderate it.

But then God, in his grace, as a free gift to us, decided to repair humanity's relationship with him at a time when humanity deserved it the least. God decided to allow humanity's debt of sin to be repaid in full.

And there is the heart of the problem. How can we do anything to wash away our own sin? Certainly, we can repent. The Israelites did it several times only to fall back in their old ways. But the only repentance acceptable to a perfectly holy God is a perfectly holy repentance. And only a perfect being could make a perfect repentance. Our own repentance would be flawed because we are flawed.

At the same time this repentance must come from humanity because we were the ones who were disobedient. Thus, both the dilemma and solution are apparent. The initiative must have come from humanity, but yet it must have been divinely perfect. Repentance must have been offered by someone who was both God and man, someone who was both divine and human.

This is where Jesus came in. This is why Jesus was born. And it leads directly to the question of why he had to die. God never intended that Jesus would live to a ripe old age. He did not send Jesus to live among us and then retire to a house along the Sea of Galilee.

No, Jesus was born for the reasons I just outlined, which were that only someone who was both human and divine could fulfill both humanity's needs and the requirements of God's own

righteousness. A person with human nature was required to act on behalf of humanity, and a person with divine nature was required to perfectly represent us to God.

There was only one way to do it. Jesus, the perfectly innocent Lamb, had to assume upon himself all the sins of humanity for then and for all time. He had to make our sins his sins, and he had to stand in our place and take God's wrath for us. He had to suffer the death that rightfully should have been ours. And only he could have done it perfectly and effectively because he was both man and God's Son.

As a result, the death of the perfect Jesus, bearing the sins of imperfect humanity, was the only way that we could be released before God from the accumulated weight of our transgressions. It was the only way that God could allow us to stand in his presence because when God looks at us, as we stand there, he will not see us in our sin but instead will see his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in our place.

V.

And so as we think about the cross, and we try to grasp the full extent of what Jesus did for us, and what God our Father did for us through Jesus. Even though we walked away from God's plans for us and served our own selfish needs, God was willing to allow his Son to redeem us.

Now, for us and for all humanity, there is a new covenant that people didn't have two thousand years ago. Now we can know the truth if we believe and have faith, and we can look forward to the blessings of eternity if we choose.

I began this homily by talking about the journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. But we see that that the road goes a little further. It is a journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter, and the path takes us straight through the cross. *Amen.*