

Paid In Full

John 18:28-19:37

Good Friday, March 21, 2008

I.

Today we complete the journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. We reaffirmed six weeks ago that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. And we also confessed a long list of our shortcomings, including recognition of the pride, hypocrisy and impatience of our lives, and our self-indulgent ways.

That was a sobering message at the time. Six weeks later we now stand before the cross on an even more solemn and mournful day.

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

Christ died for our sins. That's the core of our faith and the foundation for all we believe about Christianity. But are there times when we think of Jesus' suffering and we 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. 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 and so they can learn, just as we learned when we were children. And sometimes we remember our own childhoods and might even inwardly grin to ourselves even though we are outwardly angry or frustrated with them. Because we are sinners, we can understand of the sins of others, even though we might disapprove.

This is not true for God. Unlike us, God is holy and perfect, and cannot associate with our sins. He cannot fondly remember his own youthful mischief because he never had any. God always has been God, and his holiness is completely incompatible with our sinfulness, whether we are children or adults. For God to just accept our sin would be to compromise his holiness. That's a key theological concept, and it's where our Lord Jesus Christ enters the picture.

III.

Let's go back about two thousand years. At this time humanity really had dug itself into a big hole with God, and the hole was just getting bigger and deeper. The world really was in a mess in terms of being separated from God. Humanity was spinning out of control. Spiritually, the world was in worse shape than it is now. Here was the situation.

Because of the disobedience of the Jewish people, God's chosen, he sent prophets to call them back to faith. However, they continued to scorn God, and he sent forth his wrath. For seven hundred years before Christ's birth his people struggled under the boot of foreign domination and still their sins continued. Social injustice did not cease. Worship was corrupted by political priests, and unrighteous religious leaders served their own interests.

And Rome ruled and dominated the known world with no concept whatsoever of honoring God. People regularly engaged in pagan practices and idolatry was everywhere. Just about every kind of sin imaginable was evident with no meaningful religious, moral, or ethical infrastructure to moderate it. There was no godly church, there was little appreciation of what was right or wrong in a larger sense, and chaos was controlled only through Roman military power.

Virtually nothing on earth was devoted to God in truth and spirit. It was a very different world. 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, even as that debt mounted.

But there were two problems. The first was our inability to do anything to wash away our own sin. Certainly, people could repent, but the sin would remain. What would God do with that?

The second problem was that if God forgave our sins based on nothing more than our repentance, he could just be starting another cycle of sin and repentance similar to his volatile relationship with the Jewish people in the time of the prophets.

Our sin had to disappear; not just be forgiven, and our repentance had to be divinely guaranteed. 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. God did not plan for Jesus to live among us for a while, and then retire to a house along the Sea of Galilee.

No, Jesus' birth solved our dilemma with God. Because Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, born of the Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit, he was able to fulfill both humanity's needs and the requirements of God's own righteousness. Through his humanity he eliminated our sins by absorbing it himself, and through his divinity he forever could be our advocate before God.

So, Jesus was the only way. 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 our death. He did this in his humanity.

But then, to complete our redemption, he also became an enduring and perpetual reservoir of reconciliation that forever cleanses us in the eyes of God. He does this in his divinity.

As a result, through the death of the perfect Jesus, bearing the sins of imperfect humanity, we are released from the accumulated weight of our transgressions. And on that fateful day when we all are called to account for the content of our lives, when we must stand in God's presence, he will look at us but will see his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in our place.

v.

And so as we think about Good Friday, we can only vaguely grasp the full extent of what God our Father did for us through Jesus Christ on the cross. 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.*