

Passion Sunday - A Cycle

April 17, 2011

Jesus came as a savior. He came to heal people, to free them from the powers of evil, to teach that we must love one another and care for one another; he came to show us the way to freedom from fear, freedom from sin that destroys us, the way to true peace and happiness. He came into Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna" which in Hebrew means, "Save us, we pray." Even though it would cost him his life, he would not give up his mission or run away from it.

He did not want to see people have to suffer and yet? and yet he tells us "whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." (Lk. 14,27; cf also Mk. 8,34, Mt. 10,38 & 16,24 and Lk. 9,23). We find this challenging statement several times in the gospels. It's not what we would prefer to hear. I would prefer to hear Jesus say something like he says in John's gospel: "If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it." (Jn. 14,14) We know that doesn't always happen ?at least not in this life.

Various verbs are used to express this thought "take up your cross," such as, "carry your own cross" or "make it your own" or "endure it." One author I was reading lately (Swimming in the Sun by Albert Haase OFM) used the word "embrace it." "Embracing your cross" has the connotation of loving it. When I came across that word "embrace," it was like a shock. I could see enduring it or suffering it, but embracing it??? The more I thought about it, the more I realized it's the attitude the saints had when they had to deal with their crosses. I'm not advocating looking for suffering like a masochist. If we have problems, we try to solve them. If we are sick we see a doctor; that is the rational thing to do. We all deal with suffering that is unavoidable and inescapable. That's where Jesus was in his ministry. If he were to be faithful to his mission, he would pay a great price. That's what he had to do to be true to himself and his Father. For Jesus, for the saints, and for all of us (as I came to see) surrender, acceptance and hope are the way to prevent any cross from destroying us. I've seen it happen many times. When a person finally accepts what he or she knows they cannot change, and even embrace it knowing it will bring them closer to God, I've seen them experience a deep peace. That is the message in the cross, that is the message in the resurrection. God will not let us down. For those who love him, everything works out for the best. Amen.

Holy Thursday

April 21, 2011

We have heard in our readings about the first Holy Thursday. The first reading describes the Jewish feast of Passover which Jesus and his disciples were celebrating. This ancient remembrance of God's saving love had been observed for over 1000 years before the time of Christ. St. Paul tells us in the second reading how Jesus originated a new way for God's people

to celebrate God's saving love in the Eucharist. This is the earliest document of the institution of the Eucharist that we have. Paul's letter was written about the year 56 or 57. That's about a dozen or so years before the first gospel, the gospel of Mark, was written. Then in this evening's gospel from John we are told how Jesus demonstrated for his disciples, and for all who would be his disciples, the great lesson of love that he constantly taught. It was a demonstration of love and service that he would subsequently show in giving us the Eucharist and in giving his life on the cross.

This was the last meal Jesus would have with his disciples. He had enjoyed many meals with them since he had first called them to follow him. As they gathered for the last time, we wonder what must have been in his mind and heart? He knew what he would soon have to face and what his disciples would soon have to face. He knew he had many enemies because of his teachings. He knew that as a prophet, he would face the same destiny that most of the prophets suffered including his own cousin, John the Baptist. Although they remained in a state of denial whenever he tried to tell them, he had even warned his apostles of what would happen,

The best indication of what was in Jesus' mind and heart at the last supper is revealed to us by what he said and did that night. In the preliminary part of the Passover meal, Jesus told his disciples how much he desired to share that meal with them. He would not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. Then he blessed either the first or second cup of wine (there were always four servings of wine at Passover) and he told them I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. (Lk 22, 16-17) These words of blessing tell us Jesus saw his death as the means by which God's kingdom would begin - when God would save his people from the evils of the present age. These words also tell us that this last meal was also a pledge that God would vindicate Jesus even beyond death and bring him and his followers into God's eternal kingdom.

Sometime, during the meal, Jesus washed his disciples feet and then interpreted what he had done: "if I, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet." Sometime during the meal he also revealed that one of them was going to betray him. Judas was identified but not to the group. Then Judas left the upper room.

The meal itself started with the breaking of the bread. In the typical Passover liturgy, the head of the house took the bread for distribution as a symbol of how he provided for his own. Jesus now provided, not bread, but himself for his own. To his dying breath, Jesus continued to feed his disciples. He took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them saying, "This is my body which will be given for you." The word "body" does not mean a mere body, but one's entire life, the whole human being.

Most likely it was the fourth cup, the cup of blessing after the meal, that Jesus told them to share for he identified that cup as "the new covenant in my blood which will be shed for you." The cup is a reference to the covenant of Sinai which united the partners to the covenant, God and God's people, into one. Jesus' blood would unite us in a life-giving relationship with himself, for blood was seen by the Jews to somehow contain life. And in that is salvation - sharing in

Christ's divine life. That Jesus had them share the same cup would have been unusual for normally each person had their own cup to drink out of. It showed that in this cup they might all remain united with him.

Jesus died as he had lived: He came to serve, not to be served. His death was for us. His body is for us: "This is my body that is for you," we hear him say in Paul's letter. The fact that he gives his body for us implies the salvific nature of his death. Through our union with him, he shares his divine life with us, a life that someday we will enjoy in eternal glory. If a person did not understand all of this, St. John made it clear in the sixth chapter of his gospel where Jesus says: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day." (Jn. 6, 55-56)

As Jesus has given his life for others, in ministry, in service and in death, so too must his disciples give their lives in service to others. The Eucharist and the washing of feet give us the same message. In serving us, Christ has given us a model, that we should serve one another. Amen.

Easter

April 24, 2011

A middle-aged couple, whose last child had recently moved out on her own, were having a conversation right before Easter. The wife said to her husband that with the children grown and away from home, this was their first year they were not going to dye Easter eggs and have an Easter egg hunt. To console her, her husband responded, "That's alright, honey, we can just hide each other's pills."

I'm sure we all remember the hymn, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord." The second verse still echoes in my mind from Good Friday: "Were you there when they nailed him to the tree." Most crosses we see are made of two pieces of nicely trimmed lumber, but I would bet the Romans didn't take the time to trim the bark off many crosses. They probably looked like our own cross; like two stout tree limbs.

I listened to a lecture recently about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, (a lecture given by Professor Bart Ehrman and recorded by The Teaching Company). (cf also: Fitzmeier, The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 82:14) The lecture was very illuminating to me and I would like to share some of its ideas with you. It approached the death and resurrection from the way St. Paul might have approached it. St. Paul, as you know, taught us a lot about the resurrection. Paul was a strict Jew and he at first persecuted the Christians for believing in Jesus as the Messiah. He knew Jewish law and it is written in the law of Deuteronomy: "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." (Deut 21,23) This would have meant to Paul that Jesus was

a great sinner and that's why he was crucified. But Jesus appeared to Paul one day and called him to task for persecuting his followers. Actually Jesus identified himself with his followers and said, "why are you persecuting me?" Paul would have had to wonder if Christ was cursed by God because he was a terrible sinner, as the law said, then why did God raise him back to life? There was only one possible answer to that question for Paul: rather than being a condemned criminal, cursed to die on a cross, Jesus must have been a man of exceptional holiness to have been so uniquely blessed by God. As such a holy person, the curse of his death was not due to anything Jesus did to displease God, rather he must have borne that curse for others. Thus Paul says in Galatians: "Christ became a curse for us." (Gal. 3,13) In other words, with a logic that only a Pharisee could appreciate, Jesus took upon himself the curse of the Law, and his death was a sacrifice for the sins of others. Jesus' resurrection became the way to forgiveness of sin and a new life of holiness for those who accept him into their lives. As Paul tells us, God will declare us holy if we believe in the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, "who was handed over for our offenses and was raised up for our justification." (Romans 4,25) To say this in the simplest way possible, Jesus had to die and rise so we could rise with him. Paul's experience of seeing the risen Jesus turned his life around. Paul was one of many who saw the risen Christ, but it was probably not for a year or two after Jesus ascended to the Father.

For a few minutes I want to talk about today's gospel from Matthew. Matthew tells us about two of Jesus' women followers: Mary Magdalene and another Mary. They were one of the first people to see Jesus after the resurrection. They had watched Jesus die and saw where he was buried. They came to Jesus' tomb just as the sun was coming up on Easter Sunday morning. Probably they came to continue grieving. Matthew had already told us that the Jewish leaders asked Pilate to place soldiers at the tomb to keep anyone from stealing Jesus' body and then claiming he had risen. So, since a guard was there, the women probably weren't planning on entering the tomb. By the way, none of the gospels describe Jesus' actually rising for it is an event that is beyond description. All the gospels tell us only of things that happened on Easter Sunday. When Jesus died there was an earthquake. Matthew tells us there was another one when Jesus rose from the dead. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus' death and resurrection are of cosmic importance, shaking the foundations of the world. Then Matthew describes an angel who comes down from heaven and who rolls back the stone and sits upon it. The angel did not roll the stone back so Jesus could come out, but so that people could see in and know that Jesus had risen. The powerful Roman guards are like dead men - so frightened were they in the presence of the angel. Worldly powers are no match for the powers of heaven. The angel tells the women, "do not be afraid," and gives the women instructions to tell the apostles about Jesus' resurrection. It was, as it were, their reward for coming to see the tomb, to be able to announce this good news to the apostles. They get a further reward when Jesus appears to them while they were on their way to announce the good news to the apostles, whom Jesus calls "my brothers." Jesus also tells the women, "do not be afraid," and repeats the instructions they had received from the angel. They approach Jesus, embrace his feet and do him homage. This not only shows that Jesus' body was real, it demonstrates affection for Jesus and reverence for him. Matthew is perhaps giving us a hint of how we might approach our Lord - without fear and with affection and reverence.

We have many opportunities to approach our Lord in this way, through acts of love for others, through spiritual reading, the Scriptures and daily prayer, but there is no way that is superior to the Mass in this regard. When we come to Mass, the risen Christ is truly present in the assembly, in his word and in the sacrament and each Mass is a perfect act of worship to God because every Mass celebrates and reenacts the Easter mystery. As St. Paul tells us: "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." Amen.