

Palm Sunday Sermon:. 3/27/2010 St. George. Fr.Hugh Text: Isaiah 52:13-53:12.
Psalm 22.

The Suffering Servant and his sacrificial death

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Two men were working at a cemetery. They were close to finishing up filling in the 6 foot deep hole. Just then a car drew up and a young priest got out.

He was upset because he was late for the burial. To make matters worse it was the largest cemetery in the state and it was very easy easy to get lost there.

He drove around and finally he saw a canvas canopy over a site with two men apparently finishing up. Feeling terrible that he had been late for the funeral and that everyone had already left, he got out, opened up the prayer book and although he was alone, he went through the entire funeral service.

Half an hour later he finished with the final blessing and got back into his car and left. The older workman turned to the younger one and said: "This new priest is mighty conscientious. I've worked here for forty years and this is the first time I've seen a service of dedication for a new septic tank!"

Palm Sunday it is. The beginning of Holy Week.

So much happened in Jesus's last week on earth.

It began with His colorful entry to Jerusalem, on a donkey, with people waving palms and cheering for him, and laying down a carpet of palms for him to ride over.

It ended of course with Jesus undergoing a farce of a trial and, in an act of gross miscarriage of justice, being sentenced to a cruel death.

The Scriptures tell us that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

How are we to best understand that God gave his Son so that we could have eternal life?

There is much about the Christian Faith that is not easy to understand and is essentially mysterious. But a true mystery is never solved.

It’s not something that you figure out like the plot of a book or a movie.

But by reflecting on a mystery we can get flashes of insight into it. One of the greatest mysteries of all is Jesus’ death on the Cross.

The more we contemplate this great holy mystery of his atoning death, the closer we come to a fuller understanding of God’s love. We know it happened, and we have it on Faith that He died for us. That He sacrificed Himself for us.

But how are we to best understand that?

Jesus said: “Greater love has no man than this – that a man lay down his life for his friends.” I want to tell you about three Christian leaders who laid down their lives for their friends.

140 years ago, a young missionary priest named Father Damien was sent to one of the Hawaiian islands, the island of Molokai.

This small island was a leper colony, where the people lived in the most appalling conditions of deprivation and suffering.

At first Father Damien was not exactly thrilled about his new assignment.

At first he wanted to avoid any physical contact. But he began to serve this community of lepers and he soon grew to love the people. Rather than treat them as everyone else treated lepers, he connected with them. He treated them with respect and friendship. He did what he could to lift up these desperate people.

After a few years of living on Molokai, perhaps not surprisingly with the constant exposure, he contracted leprosy. What was surprising though, was his reaction when he discovered he had the disease.

You might think he'd have been horrified, but on the contrary, it was with great pride and joy that he stood in his pulpit the next Sunday, looked at everyone, held up his distorted and malformed hands, and said: "We lepers..."

He never left the island again. He served the islanders for the rest of his life until he died of leprosy. He identified with people in suffering and despair, and he gave his life to give them dignity and hope.

Second story: - Sixty-five years ago, in the concentration camp at Auschwitz there was an extraordinary incident. A prisoner had escaped, and the Nazi Commandant decided to condemn ten men to death by starvation - just to send a message to deter other prisoners from trying to escape. Ten names were read out.

When the tenth name was read, the man cried out:

"Oh my God, my wife, my children!"

Then a small thin man stepped forward and said to the commandant: "Let me take his place." The Nazi Commandant looked at him with surprise and said: "Who

are you?” He replied: “I am a man of little consequence, only a Catholic priest doing my duty. Let me take that man’s place, please.”

So Father Kolbe was sent off with nine other men to die of starvation in a cell.

Now, these starvation deaths had taken place in the camp before.

Only this time, instead of people outside hearing screams and cries, they heard only prayers and hymns, prayers and hymns which grew quieter and quieter with each day that passed, until there was only silence.

Father Kolbe gave his life, substituting himself for a man he barely knew, a man who went on to survive the war and to live to see his grandchildren grow up.

Fr. Kolbe also helped several other people to face their final hours of torture and suffering, with meaning and dignity.

The third story I have to tell took place just thirty years ago in San Salvador.

San Salvador is a country where there is extreme poverty, and where the gulf between the rich and the poor is enormous. Some of the priests there grew increasingly horrified by the constant social injustices and abuse of the poor. They got involved in the political struggle of the people.

However, the new traditionalist Archbishop Romero, strongly disapproved of this movement called “liberation theology.” He felt that priests should keep out of politics and stick to the usual ministries of the Church.

One day a friend of his, Father Grande, gave a sermon in which he said this:

“It is dangerous and practically illegal to be a Christian in this nation. Because the world that surrounds us is founded on an established disorder, before which the Gospel itself is subversive.”

Later that same day Fr. Grande was shot dead by two government security officers, just for making that single honest statement.

Archbishop Romero was outraged. He could no longer stand by without denouncing the cruel policies and practices of the government that exploited and abused the poor. His friend’s death had a profound impact on Romero. He said, “When I looked at him lying there dead I thought, ‘If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk his same path’.”

Romero became an advocate for the downtrodden, and a symbol of hope for the poor. Volent attacks against the Church increased. Then in 1980, on Palm Sunday, Romero was in church celebrating Holy Communion. He stood behind the altar and as he raised the chalice, he was shot through the heart with an M16. He died on the spot.

Romero gave his life to speak out against injustice, to stand up for basic human rights and to offer hope to the downtrodden.

Each one of these examples gives us just a small hint, a glimmer of insight as to the nature of Jesus’s sacrifice. But even together they scarcely begin to convey the impact of what Jesus did in sacrificing his life on the Cross.

Jesus devoted His life to everyone, especially the abused and downtrodden. He identified with suffering people right up to the very moment of his death.

In His death He substituted Himself for all people.

He forgave us our sins and invited us into a new life.

He pioneered the possibility of life beyond death, reuniting us with God the Father, and bringing new Hope to a lost world.

More than 700 years before the death of Jesus on the cross, the great prophet Isaiah wrote, “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;

Upon Him was the punishment that made us whole, and by His stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; and we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

During Holy Week we are encouraged to reflect on the life and death of our Lord.

And so may we all come to a deeper understanding of the tremendous mystery of what the Lord has done for us all. Amen.