

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Good Friday

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I have never witnessed a violent death. As a young boy I witnessed the violent beating of innocent civilians by soldiers during one of the many military insurrections in my country Ghana. I have been in situations where I have witnessed someone die a slow death. Often times those who are dying a slow death are not aware of their imminent death and so cannot voice out their discomfort or pain. It is rather the families who endure the pain of seeing a loved one slipping off.

Whether death is by violent means or not, the pain is always unbearable to the family. But it is especially unbearable when someone in his prime, and in this instance, Jesus, suffers a violent end to a life lived not in violence but in teaching and showing compassion. We can only imagine how heartbreaking it may have been for Mary-the mother of Jesus. It looked like this woman had had to contend with powerful forces; beginning with the incarnation till the fateful Friday on Calvary's hill, her son's life has been one thing after the other.

This was indeed the lowest point, where a mother stands helpless as she witnesses the violent end to a life that began in a mysterious visitation. Mary stands as heartbroken as any parent would be, looking at a life cut so short. Jesus looks at a grief-stricken mother standing beneath the cross with some of his friends, and gestures to his mother "woman behold your son, and son behold your mother."

It wasn't supposed to end this way. They may have said to themselves over and over again. What did he do to deserve this awful death? They may have asked themselves over and over again. What could we have done to prevent this from happening? They beat themselves up for not doing enough.

Life is both complex and yet simple: simple because we can mind our own business, do what we are supposed to do and all will be alright. But life can also be complex because minding our business is often not enough. How can we mind our own business, when others can't either mind their own business, unable to mind their own business or disrupt the business of others? God's relationship with the people of Israel has been a mixture of God minding their business and continually reminding them that it was not enough for them to mind their own business-either individually or collectively. And so throughout salvation history, what we find is a God who was never satisfied with the destructive tendencies of human self-absorption.

For that reason alone, God has been engaged in the human business. Not because God desires to determine the minutiae of human path, but because through God's self-giving interest in human business, we may learn what it means to behold one another, support one another and mind the business of others in a constructive way.

The sad reality of the crucifixion story is that the very human disposition which God sought its destruction, was the very trait which led to the crucifixion of Jesus. The Good Friday story in many ways is a human story: anguish, anger, betrayal, shock and death. As gruesome as Jesus' death may have been, one can imagine it to mark the end of a man whom the powers that be could simply not stop themselves from pursuing.

For the Jewish leaders, their pursuit of Jesus was on the one hand based on the fact that they were preventing an insurrection of the people by Jesus-an alibi which could offer the Romans a reason to kill and cause mayhem. On the other hand, they thought they were doing the will of God-for no single individual could hold himself to be over the power of the traditions which had held the people together over centuries. And so for those who have never been alive, and for whom death was the end of the human story, the death of Jesus to them would end the story of a man who to many-including his own friend Judas, had become a pariah.

Judas' betrayal with a kiss, the trial by the religious authority on trumped-up charges, and the ultimate betrayal by the people as they shouted crucify him, crucify him leads one to ask, why, what has he done? Don't we all deserve to know why? Pilate, as an astute leader, also wanted to know why; he wanted to know what Jesus had done to deserve death. And so he kept asking, why, what evil has he done? Pilate even sent Jesus to Herod, just so Herod could examine him for any evidence that may justify whatever punishment. Herod after examining Jesus sent him back to Pilate because he found nothing against him.

Pilate knew the system did not permit the death of another without any evidence, and so try as he did to justify Jesus' death, he could not. He ultimately had to bow to the pressure, screams and shouts of crucify him, crucify him by those who welcomed him to Jerusalem with the same screams and shouts of hosannas. If there is any evidence of the human need for salvation-and of God's presence in the person of Jesus in our lives, juxtapose these two human events which tell the human story in a uniquely powerful way.

Human self-absorption leads us to praise when we have a reason to and to tear down the very same people we praised even when we do not have a reason to. For all the often heartaches that Jesus may have given his mother Mary, she never gave up on him. She followed, and followed even to the point of his violent execution. How tender and yet strong can love be.

If Mary did not give up on Jesus, the human story of Good Friday and all salvation history points to a God who has never given up on us-He gets into our business, just so we can be prodded and reminded of how big the picture is, and how that big picture should look like.

As Mary stood by the cross with John and others, they were convinced that the story was over. If you are one who believes in circles, you will in no doubt conclude that Jesus' life was over; the circle has run its course. But God is not only a God of circles, God is also a God of cycles, God is a God for whom life never ends; but that the end is also a new beginning which offers new life and new possibilities. Remember one of the thieves who was crucified with Jesus, he was uniquely aware of the possibility of new life, and so he asked Jesus, "Remember me in your kingdom." And Jesus, even at the point of his death, offers redemption and promises new life to a repentant thief.

For those who seek this new life, the depth, length, height and breadth of their sin will not preclude them from being a part of a new beginning promised by God. It is the God of new beginnings that vindicated the one who was considered to be a pariah-for in light of the Easter story, new life springs up, giving life to him who was thought to be dead. Amen.