Good Friday Homily

If the account of the passion we hear today feels very different from what we heard on Passion Sunday, it’s no wonder. It is. In the same way that John’s approach to retelling the Last Supper is quite different than Matthew Mark and Luke, what John sees in the passion is likewise colored by years of reflection, a long life, and his relationship with the Risen Lord.

Mark tells the story of a suffering servant, who only at the end is finally, of all things, recognized by a Centurion as the Son of God.

John presents that truth about Jesus right at the beginning of his Gospel, and his awareness of Jesus as the Son of God shapes all the conversations of Jesus, his actions, his prayers, and the way he experienced the passion.

Recall Sunday how Jesus was more the silent, suffering servant before the Jewish and Roman authorities? The just, innocent one unjustly condemned?

In John, the tables are turned. Jesus isn’t on trial. Pilate and the Jewish leaders are. Pilate goes back and forth, inside and outside the Praetorium. What will he decide …. Will he stand for truth, or cave in to the jealousy of those who don’t want Jesus upsetting their world? You see, those in power in Jerusalem got there by aligning themselves with Rome. Collaborators.

Rome knew only one kind of power. Military might. Power over the populace, over slaves on whose backs the empire was built, and over each territory they conquered. That same brute power kept people controlled. Power to intimidate by horrific means like crucifixion, power to instill fear and force compliance.

In his eating with sinners, forgiving sins, being the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, Jesus’ kingdom operates with a different kind of power. On the cross God reveals the power of self-sacrificing love. Instead of returning harm for harm, hate for hate, even death for death, the power of the cross is just the opposite. Christ loved so much that he absorbed all the venom thrown at him. The jealousy, the mockery, the condemnation, the beating, the crucifixion. He absorbed it, transformed it into a passion to forgive, and in a way that we can only understand through the gift of grace, the sting of sin and death was removed. Death doesn’t have to beget more death. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: Oh death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting?

Not only did Christ set loose the power of love that is the opposite of hate, he gives those who choose to follow him the grace to grow in the power of love. First to experience this incredible love, then to bring this mystery into our world today. The cross is not the only place to see this divine form of power. After revealing, living dying and rising through this amazing love, Christ gave it to his disciples when he breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. He has given it to us as well.

Paul exercised this paradoxical power when he gave up hunting Christians down, joined them, and suffered being thrown out of the synagogue, endured beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonment, and finally martyrdom. He won a martyr’s crown. With no regrets. Just incredible joy.
St. Peter discovered how to tap into the power of self-sacrifice, leading the church, suffering martyrdom, yet ultimate replacing the pagan Roman Empire.

We have many feast days of martyrs that we celebrate. Not for their failure, but for their victory.

We have other examples we can consider as well, closer to home. Physical death is not the only way to die to self. A spouse or a friend lets the one they love pour out their anger at some hurt, real or perceived, but keeps on loving them. Eventually, the love softens their spouse or their friend’s heart. Being truly loved sinks in. That changes a person! Their hurt is healed, they are transformed, and the relationship goes to a new level. A song in the musical Aspects of Love puts it well: Love Changes Everything.

Taking care of a parent with dementia: a loving daughter or son puts up with fits and outbursts when mom or dad isn’t himself or herself. Being irrational and turning on others can be part of the disease. But caregivers keep on loving, and grace is set loose, for all involved.

The greatest power a parent has is to keep on loving when their son or daughter isn’t acting in a lovable way.

Relationships can be lived out as one person controlling another, and sadly that is the only kind of relationship many folks have ever known. But Christ teaches us about a different approach to relationships, where love, not control or pride, rules the day.

How can it be that a way that appears so weak can actually be the only way that conquers sin and death, that creates relationships that stretch into eternity?!? It is no accident that we speak of the Paschal mystery. It can defy human logic.

But really, is life without mystery really authentic human life? Let’s face it, often we are a mystery to our very selves, even though we live in our own skin every day! We do our best to embrace the mystery of our life, and today, the even greater mystery of the cross. We allow the mystery to envelope us, in divine love and mercy.

Prayer, talking it over with Jesus is the only way to really enter into the mystery, find peace there, and begin to live the mystery with the Lord’s help.

When we approach the cross in veneration, it isn’t because crucifixion was a great way to put down rebellion or put people in their place. We venerate the cross as the place where Jesus faced down false power, destructive power, the power of evil, and revealed what true power, the power of divine love can accomplish.

The cross is a symbol of redemption, of mercy, of a powerful form of sacrificial love we cherish, and pray the Lord will help us to live. Here sin, hatred, jealousy, arrogance, and death itself were defeated.

I can’t put it better than Tim Keller, in his book, The Reason for God:

The pattern of the Cross means that the world’s glorification of power, might, and status is exposed and defeated. On the Cross Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat,
achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. Jesus Christ turns the values of the world upside down.

Lord, give us the grace to enter into the mystery. Help us let go of our fallen nature, bringing it to the cross, that we may be raised up to divine life with you.