Good Friday Homily


Innocent victims die at the hands of suicide bombers somewhere, seemingly every day. It is almost so commonplace in parts of the world that it barely makes the news. It takes a large scale attack like that in Brussels to really get our attention until the next big news story. Yet there are people around the world grieving the loss of innocent life every day.

Some grief lives lost from terrorist attacks. Others grieve the loss of life from military action to fight terrorism. In either case, those left behind have hearts filled with pain and anger, which can easily turn to bitterness, even a desire for revenge. No doubt, many cry out in anger, where was God? How could God let these things happen? It is not a new cry.

In the history of the Roman Empire, Good Friday was one of many days when people were crucified. After putting down the 3rd slave revolt, a hundred years previous, Rome crucified 6,000 slaves, lining the road from Capua to Rome. Their bodies were left hanging there as a warning. Rebels killed slave owners, the State crucified rebels. Each gave vent to their fears, their resentments, their anger, seeking vengeance. And of course there are always people who stoke those fires and try to stir up fear and anger for their own agendas.

Pope John Paul, Pope Benedict, now Pope Francis have all spoken out about the culture of death that grips so much of our world today. They haven’t argued for more bombing, swift, fierce immediate retribution, or a more aggressive application of capital punishment. Just the opposite. They have taught that violence and a failure to respect human life only tightens the grip of the culture of death. A key point: while the state has a duty to protect innocent life, often efforts to combat violence fall far too heavily on the innocent. Rather than violence, vengeance and retribution, each has invited us to discover the message of Good Friday has to offer. Christ is still crucified in our world today.

Seeing human life as expendable, failure to reverence human life has consequences far deeper than most folks care consider. If it is perfectly fine to execute criminals, even after it has been discovered that far too often those condemned are innocent, (remember our readings today?), it sends a message that killing is a legitimate and effective first response to a variety of complex situations. The result? The culture of death around us lulls us into believing that executing people is the way to maintain social order. Then others come to see murdering the innocent as the way to create fear and terror, and replace the social order. Far too many in our world see their only hope as this: turn the power of death against the folks in power – that is the way to end disenfranchisement, injustice, and to get into power. It’s a horrific cycle!

Why do we need to stare this evil in the face when we have come to church to find peace? Because at the heart of the mystery we celebrate today is a very different message than Rome crucifying slaves, or ISIS torturing and killing men, women and children, or warplanes bombing civilian areas.

Might makes right is a pernicious, even if common way of understanding power. One might even think it is the first principle of politics. It IS a colossal temptation to think that way. Perhaps
that is one face of original sin. I suspect might makes right is somehow embedded in our brain stem, our reptilian brain. But what we encounter upon the cross is a very different kind of power. The power of 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 lose the power of love that is the opposite of hate, he gives those who choose to follow him the grace to grow into the power of love. First to experience, then to bring this mystery into our world today.

The cross is not the only place to see this divine form of power. Christ didn’t just the power of love, he 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. And a martyr’s crown. No regrets. 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.

A spouse or a friend lets the one they love get their anger at some hurt, real or perceived out, but keeps on loving them. Eventually, the love softens their heart and 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 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 some 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 envelopes 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 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.