

Homily
Good Friday
April 2, 2021

“He was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins...by his wounds we were healed.” My brothers and sisters, we have come to that day of the year that is defined by a death, the death of Jesus. It’s a day marked by a certain kind of sadness, but we call this day “good,” because of what happened and what was done for us on this same day long ago in Jerusalem.

In the course of John’s Passion account, and the accounts in the other gospels, we see that Jesus is placed on trial more than once. First in the garden, Jesus is judged to be a criminal and arrested. He was bound and brought forcibly to the high priest. He was put on trial then before the high priest and the Sanhedrin, who questioned him about his teaching and his disciples. They had already made up their minds that Jesus had to go, he had to die. Next, Jesus was put on trial before Pontius Pilate, who seemed uninterested at first and didn’t know what to do with Jesus. So he sent him to Herod, who wanted Jesus to perform some sign for his amusement. But Jesus said nothing to Herod, and he was sent back to be judged by Pilate. Pilate still didn’t find any guilt in Jesus and didn’t want to condemn him, but he did.

Judas apparently put Jesus on trial when he betrayed him for some silver coins. He judged Jesus to be unworthy, or at least unbelievable as a Messiah. And eventually the crowds put Jesus on trial too. Those who greeted Jesus with hosannas and called him Son of David on Sunday now cried for him to be crucified on Friday. They jeered at him and mocked him as he carried his cross. They judged him to be helpless and ridiculous. One trial after another.

But who was really on trial in these Passion events? Was it Jesus? Or was it the soldiers, the chief priests and the Pharisees? Was Jesus on trial before Pilate and Herod, or were they on trial before him? I think the answer is obvious. It really wasn't Jesus who was on trial, it was the whole cast of characters who brought about his crucifixion. And in all honesty, we have to admit that we are on trial too. We bear our own responsibility for the death that Jesus suffered. The high priest and the other religious leaders were jealous of Jesus, and they were blind to the truth about him. Pilate was an agent of the Roman emperor, and he didn't care about Jesus; he just wanted to avoid trouble and a black mark on his record.

But we all bear responsibility for what happened to Jesus. If we think and pray on it, we all can identify the sins that weigh upon his shoulders, our sins. It might be our lack of charity, our readiness to gossip and harm others. It could be greed and our enslavement to the things of this world. It might be a relationship that is sinful, that keeps me from friendship with God. It might just be simple indifference toward others, an unwillingness to even notice them or their needs. There are so many possibilities, and they all add to the weight of the cross that Jesus carried.

Eventually, after all these trials, Jesus was found guilty and condemned to death, but the guilt is really ours. We are the cause of all this, and Jesus pays the price for our guilt. But that's why we can call this day "good." God knew that we could not save ourselves from this guilt, he didn't want us to be chained by this guilt, and he didn't accept that the only possibility left was our condemnation. He loved us too much to allow us to be forever lost. And so he sent his Son, his own beloved Son who would accept the sentence for us. "By his wounds we were healed."

To the eyes of the world, the cross of Jesus was an ending, a defeat. The judgment of Judas, and Caiaphas, and Pilate, and the crowd seemed to have won the day. The trial was over, Jesus was dead, and that was that. But we know differently. The crucified Christ is much more than a sign of defeat. In the words of St. Alphonsus, “it is a visible sign of God’s passionate love for us.” Pilate placed a mocking inscription on the cross that said, “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.” Pilate, the unjust judge, in this way became a prophet despite himself. The kingship of Jesus was proclaimed before all the world. He is indeed the king of the world. In sinking to the depths, he rose to the heights. Out of love he took our guilt upon himself and accomplished our redemption. He offered himself, and in this way he is now the revelation of the true God, the God who is love. We look on Jesus crucified, and now we know who God is. Now we know what true kingship is.

We were the ones really on trial, but Jesus took the sentence for our sins on himself. “By his wounds we were healed.” He takes to himself the whole suffering of humanity, and he makes God present in the very place where he seems completely absent. The cross of Jesus is a cosmic event, an event that shakes history. Matthew tells us that the earth trembled when Jesus died; the whole world is shaken as the trial reaches its climax. Or maybe it’s a trembling of relief, that the judgment against the world is averted, and we are shaken free from the guilt of our sins.

After the many trials and sufferings were over, there’s a little detail in John that gives us hope. Joseph of Arimathea was given the body of Jesus and buried him in a new tomb that was in a garden. At the burial of Jesus, the cemetery, the place of death, becomes a garden, a place of

life. The garden tomb symbolizes that the judgment of death has lost its power, the dominion of death is about to end. It was in a garden that sin first brought judgment upon humanity, and in this garden, the judgment against us is removed. In the garden tomb was laid the One who bore the sins of us all, and from that garden tomb would come forth the Savior of us all.