

Sermon for Good Friday | 2017

By Fr. Hayden A. Butler

Lectionary Readings:

Hebrews 10:1-10; John 19:1-37

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Suffering and death are uncomfortable facts. We live in a time in which we expend great energy hiding them from our sight. Despite our efforts to pretend they do not exist, however, all of us has had the experience of suffering and death intruding in our lives, interrupting our plans. This might be one of the worst parts about suffering and death. No matter what we do, they always loom just outside of our control. They remind us just how not in control we actually are, and how fragile and conditional our existence really is. We struggle with focusing on this uneasy thought. We seek to minimize it or medicate it or ignore it completely.

Even here, at the end of Lent, despite our focus on temptation and struggle, on the suffering and death of Christ, even if we've been participating consistently for the last forty days, we most likely set our sights on Easter some time ago, and are now eagerly anticipating the Resurrection. If we're not careful, though, we might be tempted to skip over this final crucial step of the Lenten journey. But this is the gift of Good Friday. It disrupts our attempt to avoid the realities of suffering and death. Good Friday is disruptive, it defeats our attempts at the temporary comforts of turning a blind eye by giving us an entire day dedicated to show us how Christ did not avoid suffering and death, but embraced them to Himself and defeated them on the Cross so that we could know the permanent peace of Resurrection. And so, let's pause together here this afternoon and be present with Christ who dies for us.

For as familiar a sight it is to us, the image of Jesus being crucified remains a mystery; in the face of such a shocking and violent image we may rightly ask why God, in His infinite power and goodness, chose to let such a thing happen? Why did God let His child suffer? Why did this man who loved the whole world have to endure such a terrible ordeal? Was there really no other way? Jesus Himself asked these questions in Gethsemane the night before he died. "Father, if there is some other way...but even so may your will be done." The Father does not take away the suffering of the Son. The Son knows that the Father wills this difficult path because the love of God requires Christ's complete offering of Himself as He does so on behalf of us all. Good Friday is a gift because it reveals to us that the shape of Christian love is a Cross before it is an empty tomb, a love that suffers long the pain of self-giving and life-giving to a scared and angry people. The Cross is necessary to love us because in revealing how far God will go to redeem us, the suffering and death of Christ overwhelms our skepticism and silences us, forcing us to reckon with it.

This is so hard to take in, the idea that we are loved this much by God. Sin has broken our ability to receive God's love and to love Him in response. Because of sin, we are vulnerable, broken, ashamed, lonely, and suspicious. We resist the openness it would require to be fully known and to fully know one another. We protect those places, those tender and feverish spots in our souls that have been hurt and more importantly out of which we have hurt one another. In this knowledge is shame, the desire to hide from God, from each other and especially from ourselves. "Where are you?" asks God to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Our Father and Mother hid from God, naked and fearful to be known by God. And we follow their example. Then comes loneliness, not only from physical companionship but at our most inward level--we become utterly alone when we no longer hope to be known and loved. This is Hell, and in that loveless hell we become suspicious of love, and despairing of love.

But Jesus shows us the way back from our hiding, He rescues us from it by entering into it. We look out of the keyhole of our locked hearts and see Him lay aside peace and life for suffering and death. He lets himself be stripped naked, lets himself be brought to a shuddering and tripping and fainting vulnerability, lets himself be derided and mocked and shamed, lets Himself be displayed to God and to the whole world. He owns every aspect of our suffering and makes it a part of Himself. Suffering and death threaten to be endless, and the suffering and death which are the results of human sin would indeed know no limits if it were not pressed in on all sides by Christ. Assuming our suffering to Himself, He conquers it. Because of the Crucifixion, suffering and death no longer have a final say in human life, can no longer threaten to be endless. Because Christ has endured all, we may have hope that all suffering can be endured and can become the path to Resurrection. Because Christ is victorious, suffering and death have been made to serve Him, and now that they serve Him, they can become paths by which we are saved.

This truth is hard to bear, though, because it means we need Him to endure suffering and death for us today. And it is difficult for us in our brokenness to accept that we are loved this much. We shout at Him on the Cross: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross!" We mock, but beneath our mocking we also beg Him to make this stop. Where so much of the suffering and death we come to know leaves us trying to explain why there is so much hurt, in this instance we know for certain--*this* suffering and *this* death are because we were too broken to be loved any other way. We needed God to endure this for us in order to make us whole. We want to look away because we don't want to face the fact that this must happen. Come down, let us work things out another way. Just not this! Please, not this! It is the cry of every heart experiencing and witnessing suffering.

But this is the anchor of the Gospel. There has been no sin, suffering, or death that is worse than the Crucifixion. It is the gravest crime humankind has ever and will ever commit, the most devastating and suicidal loss that has ever been known. And we are all complicit in it, because our sin, our brokenness made necessary the Cross. We crucified Him. But this is our hope: since

He has set right the greatest of harms, He shall set right everything which is less. All suffering can be redeemed. All death can be redeemed. He embraces all suffering and all death so that we can be embraced and held by Him in all seasons of our suffering and at the hour of our death.

And so we have but one thing to do: wait here with our Lord until the end, wait and look and hope upon the One who loved us to the end.

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