

GOOD FRIDAY
2 April 2010
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Church of the Holy Communion

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Something more than 1,600 years ago while instructing catechumens who hoped to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, looked at them and said, “The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.”ⁱ

Today, Good Friday, we pass by the dragon, and it is necessary that we take a good and hard look as we do so.

Although, perhaps at first glance, it may appear that there is not too terribly much to see here in this pierced and broken man, bleeding his life out one Friday noon. One more trouble maker, one more would-be messiah, ground to dust beneath the heels of military empire and religious power and social prestige. It happens every day. It’s happening somewhere right now. So, we may say, keep moving; there is nothing to see here.

Or, it may be that we do see something in this blotted out and bleeding man – some kind of metaphor, a sign, a symbol, even a powerful symbol, of “God on the side of victims,” or of “God present in suffering.” In which case, for God’s sake I ask you to *keep moving; there is nothing to see here - nothing*. I tell you, it happens every day. Every day, every minute of every day, is noon on Friday somewhere – for some hopeless Haitian child in the rubble of Port au Prince, for an ICU patient struggling for breath just a few blocks from here, for some mourning mother of a lost and wayward child – somewhere, the nails are being driven in to someone; it is always and ever noon on Friday, so might as well keep moving—there is nothing to see.

Because, honestly, the last thing we need is another symbol, another metaphor. What we need, what I need, is not a new *interpretation* of my circumstances but the actual *transformation* of my being; not a new if however provocative way to think about my illness, but the cure.

Can you imagine a missionary, an aid worker, travelling to Haiti, pulling that child out of the rubble where her parents lay crushed dead and saying, “Think of it this way...?”

I am afraid, and I confess to you, that too often in my ministry, from the pulpit and in the confessional and in the counseling office, I have done exactly that.

But the fact is, and the faith of the Church is, that this long ago Good Friday, this Cross and this dying, dying, *dead* man is not a sign, or a symbol, or a metaphor of God’s love – no, this is God’s love itself, and it is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”ⁱⁱ The fact, the actual historical event, that Jesus of Nazareth “was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate” is actually, “for us men and for our salvation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In our need, “fast bound by sin and nature’s night,”^{iv} God has heard our desolate cry, and the Cross of Jesus Christ is his terrible and beautiful answer. On the Cross, Jesus – true God and true Man, wholly

innocent, spotless Love Incarnate – offered himself in obedience to the Father’s will, accepting (as Fr. Tobin said at our parish retreat) the Father’s invitation to fulfill his humanity, and so fulfill ours.^v

And so Jesus accepted the Father’s invitation, and so accepted our conniving at betrayal with Judas; he accepted our cynical collaboration with Pilate and the chief priests, accepted the nails you and I drove into his hands and feet, the crown of thorns we pressed onto his sacred head, the spear we thrust into his side.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Oh, I was there alright. And that is why we must stop and look at the dragon, because that dragon is the truth about you and me.

Accepting all of this – and how we have piled it on – Jesus willingly gave himself, a fragrant offering to God, beloved Son of the Father, not so that justice-as-vengeance might be assuaged, but so that love might be fulfilled. And God is Love, and Jesus is God-made-Man. In creation and covenant, God bound himself in faithful love to humanity, and in the Cross of Christ, God has graced humanity with the only appropriate response – an utterly yielded, fully surrendered, “Yes.” And the Holy Eucharist, the memorial of his one oblation of himself once offered, is the new Covenant in his blood; it is life and salvation because it is Christ Crucified for us.

And so the dragon is slain. As St. Paul says, “I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”^{vi} When we were bound by our sins and slaves of our own wills, our Lord fastening himself to the Cross, and set us free. By the grace of faith and baptism we are joined to him in his death, that perfect gift of love, that “single offering for sin for all time,” as we have heard tonight from the epistle to the Hebrews. And being joined to him in his death – which always means being joined to him on his Cross – we are taken into the eternal life, the divine life, he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and that life begins right now.

Thus God makes “an instrument of shameful death to be unto us the means of life.” “Sweetest wood and sweetest iron”: not a sign, not a symbol, but the thing itself. And the only way past the dragon to the Father of Souls.

We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee, because by thy holy Cross thou hast redeemed the world.

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ⁱ Cited in Flanner O’Connor, “The Fiction Writer in His Country.”

ⁱⁱ Rm 1.16, cf 1 Cor 1.18ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Yeago develops this theme in “Crucified for Us” in *Nicene Christianity*, Chris Seitz, ed.

^{iv} “And Can It Be,” Charles Wesley

^v <http://www.holycomm.org/video>

^{vi} Gal 2.20