

HOMILY FOR GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 2012

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

Have you ever thought about how many crosses there are in the world, how many there are, and how many there have been throughout the years? We see the image of the cross everywhere we go— on chains around our necks, hanging on walls, in the chancels of churches, in paintings. And even without meaning to make a statement or anything, we see the cross in architecture— in bridges, electrical poles and towers, and even in doors. Did you know that many interior doors in our homes are in what is called the “cross and Bible” style? The top of the door will have sections that are in the form of a cross. The bottom of the door will have two recessed rectangular panels which symbolize the pages of an open Bible. You may very well have a cross and Bible door in your house.

The cross is a shape that even a toddler can make using a crayon and it will be recognizable. The cross is a symbol of what we believe, and each cross we see reminds us of the cross of Calvary. During Lent, I only wear a cross made of nails or a simple wooden cross. But I have many other crosses, most given to me as gifts. Some are small, some larger; some ornate, and others plain. (My niece who lives in Northern Ireland gave me a “prisoner’s cross.” It is shaped to fit in the palm of a man’s hand and tucked into the sleeve of his shirt so it can’t be seen. The “prisoner’s cross” came from a bad period of the country’s history, a time of religious oppression.) I even have a cross called the “cross of Lorraine.” It is a cross which has two horizontal pieces, one larger than the other.

You and I who believe in Jesus Christ, our crucified Lord, love the cross. In spite of its horror and shame, its cruelty and gore, the cross is for us a symbol of how much God loves us. God loved us so much that God sent his only Son to die on the cross

for us. Jesus died the death of a common criminal. He was tormented, beaten, tortured, and humiliated for our sakes. Then, He who was guiltless, was made to suffer the kind of death that only the worst criminals were made to endure. He was nailed to a filthy, blood-stained and encrusted cross, and hung between two criminals. The cross was the gas chamber or the electric chair of its time— terrible and disgusting! Yet, it was transformed when the body of our Lord was crucified. It was changed into something quite beautiful. It became the symbol of life, salvation, and hope.

Sometimes, I wonder if there might be a better symbol for us Christians to use, and an empty tomb and a big stone come to my mind. But that is a very difficult image to create or to paint. For one thing, it would not be easily recognizable. Whereas, the cross is simple and it comes in so many different forms.

The cross has the power to take our breath away when we really think about what it means. The large rough cross standing behind me with its crown of real thorns is life-like enough that it is easy to think of our Lord on a similar cross. When I see someone make the sign of the cross, I am reminded of how easy it is to take the cross with me wherever I go. Though we Protestants don't often make the sign of the cross, it is a lovely reminder of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The cross' power is not just the power to take our breath away, or even bring us to tears. The power of the cross is in what it means for you and for me. Jesus came to this earth for one purpose. Yes, he taught many good lessons. He said that we should love God and our neighbor. We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We are to be servants to others. Jesus even gave us an example by washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus did heal the sick, those with leprosy and those possessed by demons, the blind, the deaf, the lame. And he did raise the dead, three times at least; the widow's son, Jairus' daughter, and his friend Lazarus. Jesus also fed the hungry,

feeding thousands of people with only a boy's small lunch. Jesus performed miracles and he gave us many parables for us to learn from.

Jesus' parables give us all kinds of clues about the character of God and God's Son. The parable that we call *The Prodigal Son* gives us one of the easiest lessons in forgiveness. We all know that story of the two brothers, the older one who always does what is expected, always obeys his parents. The younger one is so different. He is the black sheep of the family, as the saying goes. The younger brother decides that he wants his father's inheritance early, before his father dies. He wants to leave home and go his own way do his own thing. The father's heart was broken on hearing the request, but nevertheless he did what his boy asked. He gave him half of all he earned.

It is a sad story, is it not? The younger brother goes into a far land. He is a very foolish man! Soon he has squandered all of that money for which his father and his father's father had worked for many years. The whole inheritance has been wasted on wild living, on hard drinking and loose women, and heaven knows what else. There is nothing left! He has disgraced his father's good name by his despicable behavior. What can he do? He is in a foreign country where no one knows his family or his father; and his own reputation could not be worse. There is no one to save him, no one to help him. He is the lowest sinner. All he can do is to go and work with pigs, "slopping the hogs." For a Jew to do that would be the worst kind of blasphemy. Yet, that is not the worst of it. The younger brother is so very hungry, and the only food available to him is the slop which he feeds to the pigs.

We can all imagine how soon he would fall into the most desperate depression. He has fallen as low as he can go. He has hit rock bottom! It is only then that he begins to think of home and of his father. And it is then he realizes just what he has

given up. He decides to go back home and throw himself on the mercy of his father. He is determined to ask his dad if he can come back home as a servant because he does not deserve anything more than that. So, he goes back. Here's the thing, the Bible says, that the father was watching for that boy. I imagine his mom was too. I think that everyday they walked down to the end of the road, put their hands to their eyes to block the sun, and looked for their son. Their hearts wanted that son of theirs to do right, to come back to them, to ask for forgiveness and be restored to them.

Then, one day, after waiting for so long, there he was, their lost boy— filthy, ragged, sick, starving, and crying. And that father threw his arms around him and welcomed him home with all the love that can possibly be imagined. Now, I could say a lot about the older son's reaction to the whole reunion thing, but his is not the story for this day and time. It is a story which needs to be examined, but not today, not on Good Friday.

Friends, that prodigal son is us, you and me, and everyone else in the world for that matter. And that father is our Heavenly Father. Here's what I think. I think that God just got tired of waiting for all of us prodigals to change our ways and come to our sense and go home. God got tired of waiting, and God knew that without some help we would just keep on making our mistakes over and over again. So, out of love that only God could give, Jesus Christ was sent to this world. As I said before, Jesus did many things while he lived here, but there was only one real purpose for him coming, and that was to die for us. He willingly gave up his life to take away the sins of the world. On the cross. Jesus was crucified for our sakes. He destroyed the enemies of sin and death, and He brought to the world the promise of salvation and eternal life for all who believe in him. The power of the cross is the power of God to bring forgiveness to even the worst of sinners. Christ died for prodigals wherever they may be. He died for you! Thanks be to God who gives us victory through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

