

Sermon Good Friday Year C 2019

Good Friday calls us to gather and stand around the cross. The symbol of our Christian faith is in many ways an archetypal symbol; its two crossed beams joining into harmony the four directions. Its vertical beam connecting heaven and earth. And the horizontal beam pointing to earth's furthest ends and Christ's embrace who draws all men to himself. But outstretched arms also suggests opposing poles and that there might be different reactions to its truth and mystery of the Cross. Indeed, different responses to Christ is what we see throughout the gospels and certainly in the Passion Narratives. As we hear it today, on the one hand Mary and John at the foot of the cross, in silent, prayerful and loving watchfulness. But on other side those who denied him, abandoned him, who shouted, *crucify him!* Those who mocked him, stripped him. The radical scandal of the cross inspires many different responses...

This past week so many have been shocked at saddened at the fire which so seriously damaged the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Symbol of that city and of France itself; symbol of the glorious achievements of the medieval man; symbol of the western civilization; but most importantly symbol of *faith*. We may not yet know – indeed ever know – what caused the fire. But what we do know is that this event has *not been* greeted with universal heart break and sadness. Moments after the news broke – and a staggering number since – there has been any number of responses *celebrating* the fire. Yes, people rejoicing at its potential destruction! Of course, any sane, reasonable and in fact civilized person *should* be shocked and saddened at Notre Dame's catastrophe. But instead we find others delighting in this tragedy. Symbols of our faith inspire different responses...

This though should come as no surprise. Throughout Europe acts of violence, desecration, vandalism and destruction of churches has dramatically escalated in recent years. In France, two churches are desecrated every day on average. One source has outlined how there were 1,063 attacks on Christian churches or symbols in France in 2018 a 17% increase to the previous year.

A 2017 report from Germany noted that in the Alps and Bavaria alone, around 200 churches were attacked and many crosses broken that year. It has been noted that police are currently dealing with church desecrations again and again. One commentator has dared remark that "there is a creeping war against everything that symbolizes Christianity: attacks on mountain-summit crosses, on sacred statues by the wayside, on churches... and recently also on cemeteries.' Another has written that "Crosses are broken, altars smashed, Bibles set on fire, baptismal fonts overturned, and the church doors smeared with Islamic expressions like 'Allahu Akbar.'" But there remains an eloquent silence in both France and Germany about the scandal of these desecrations. Our faith and its symbols inspire different responses...

As the church in the West, we might now be slowly waking up to a new understanding of an ancient phenomenon: "hatred of the faith," that *odium fidei* that identified the deaths of ancient martyrs. But we might understand something more of why *odium fidei* – hatred of the faith – is directed against us if we look to Cross of Christ itself. Among all the facts available to us regarding Jesus of Nazareth, none is more incontrovertible than his execution on a Roman cross by order of Pontius Pilate. From historical records we can be fairly certain about many of the details of how and why Jesus himself suffered and died. Crucifixion normally included a flogging beforehand, with victims generally made to carry their cross beams to the location of their executions, where they were either bound or nailed to the cross with arms extended, raised up, and perhaps seated on a small wooden peg.

But it is also essential to remember that *Rome did not* expose its *own* citizens to this form of punishment. Crucifixion *was not* the method of choice for execution of its own kind on account of the excruciating pain it caused. It was too awful a death for any *Roman* citizen to suffer. Instead, it was reserved above all to those who resisted imperial rule. In other words, that Jesus *was* crucified shows he was a character regarded as antagonistic, a *threat to the empire*.

From the Passion proclaimed today we hear that the *religious* authorities in perceived Jesus as a threat. But as an occupied people the Jews had no judicial right to execute anyone. Their task, then, was to convince the ruling powers that Jesus' *religious* threat was also an *imperial* one. The ploy works. Indeed, the inscription announcing his capital offence, *The King of the Jews*, marks Jesus as a pretender to the throne. In sentencing Jesus to death on the cross Rome was broadcasting: *let the cruel execution of Jesus be a lesson to the Jewish population that Rome will not tolerate any attempt to incite the people to rebellion. Rome will not tolerate any threat to its order.*

Christ dies because he is seen as a threat. For the faithful martyrs even to this day who identify with him and follow him, this too must be read into *their* story. When our churches and other symbols of our faith are desecrated and destroyed it is because they are read as a threat. Christians who remain true to their calling and identity will be a threat. As for Christ, so for us, we must expect our life, teaching and witness to be a threat. And as for Christ - and we are seeing in our own day - the threat is met so often by trying to silence it, remove it, by trying to exterminate it.

While this is deeply unsettling - and it is a scandal that the scale of Christian persecution today is all but overlooked by the media - ought we be surprised? For *there is* something deeply challenging and profoundly threatening about the Gospel of Jesus Christ! It should unsettle and disrupt all our lives!! And if it isn't then we should well ask, what kind of faith am I actually subscribing to?! A social convention? A family expectation? A comfortable club? A habit?

We pray we might not be called to witness with the giving up of our own lives. But we can and we should witness! Put a cross in your homes so all who visit know your true allegiance. Keep Sunday as a holy day. Say grace before family meals. Observe diligently and seriously the Christian fasts and celebrate with the joy the Christian festivals. Know the stories of our faith. Hold fast its teachings. If we cannot be faithful in the small things, how can we be faithful in a larger things?

In a few moments we gather before the cross and we take the opportunity once more to venerate it. We do so mindful of the costliness of faith, just as Christ's own faith was costly – and ultimately so – for him. My brothers and sisters, the costliness of our faith, we pray, will not see us pay the ultimate price. But there *is* a price. The faith of the Cross is the faith in which the whole of our lives is given over to God. It is not, I am afraid to say, the faith most of us experience. It is not the safe, timid, anonymous faith which is a mark of much of the Christian west. And it is not the faith in which we take God out of his box only on special occasions. A timid faith makes a mockery of the cross. It insults our Lord.

The faith of the cross remains and ever will be challenge. The faith of the cross remains and ever will be a threat! But it is the mystery of the Cross, that by accepting its scandal, by allowing the whole of our beings to be shaped by it, then we are granted true healing and life. Amen.

It's a point well-established but little appreciated: we have been living, and we're living now, in the greatest era of persecution in Christian history. More Christians died for the faith in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries of Christian history *combined*. And while the character of the persecutors has changed - from the lethal heyday of the twentieth-century totalitarianisms to the first decades of the twenty-first century - the assault on the Christian faithful today is ongoing, extensive, and heart-rending. In looking at contemporary stories of martyrdom

We might complain from time to time about the assaults faith suffers in our land: the difficulty we have in maintaining religious education in schools; keeping the Lord's Prayer in parliament; the removal of any mention of God in the oath of allegiance girl guides undertake.

We know how, in this country as least, it is next to impossible to defend a distinct, Christian ethic in the public sphere without being labeled an intolerant bigot, and dismissed as some sort of moralistic dinosaur. But to hold before us those who really are at risk of life and limb for the faith is a useful reminder that, whatever the contempt orthodox Christians are called to suffer today for fidelity to biblical truth in the comfortable, decadent, and increasingly intolerant West, others are being called to suffer far more. Their witness should strengthen ours.

The practice of crucifixion was, however, subject to wild variation, depending on the varied depravity of the executioners. The act of crucifixion resulted in little blood loss and death came slowly, as the body succumbed to shock. This form of capital punishment was savage and heinous, but for other reasons. Executed publicly, situated at a major crossroads or on a well travelled road, for ultimate exposure and shame, devoid of clothing, left to be eaten by wild beasts and birds, victims of crucifixion were subject to optimal, unmitigated, viscous ridicule.

But why are so many Christians in the world today having to pay a price for fidelity to the Gospel? Why their death? What is it for? On the one hand we can dismiss it easily enough as examples of human violence, depravity, barbarity and savagery. But this *does not* account for those who maintain their faith when faced with the choice of hiding, of being anonymous, of being discrete or of even abandoning the faith. These men, women and children have died because, even in the knowing face of danger, they stood fast. Their suffering and death is a sharing in Christ's own suffering and death. Saint Paul's dictum, *it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me* has taken such hold as to have them identify personally with Christ's death. They have come to identify so personally as for it to take effect literally. In accepting faith in Christ, they have accepted it all.

This goes *some way* to explaining why followers of Christ follow in his death. But why did *Jesus* die?