

April 22, 2011
Good Friday

“Under Christ/In Christ”

Today we regard Jesus on the cross. We can come at it from several directions. In this Tenebrae service we especially focus on Jesus’ last words from the cross and each of these could be several sermons in themselves. Taken as a whole, our reaction to the crucifixion story can change with our perspective as we are drawn closer to the cross.

Standing far off and 2000 years apart, we might look at Good Friday with a feeling of shock and outrage. How could the Jews and the Romans carry out such a grand miscarriage of justice? Jesus had done nothing but good. He had loved people, healed people, done signs and wonders which attested to His being sent from God. Even if they couldn’t have accepted Jesus as God’s Son, they should have recognized Him as a prophet. Yet in their greedy zeal to hold onto their own power and misguided understanding of the law, they conspire to condemn the most innocent of all men to a torturous and bloody death. How dare they?

Yet if we draw ourselves closer, standing at the back of that crowd screaming “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” and later jeering and mocking Jesus on the cross at Calvary, we know that we can’t hold onto our righteous indignation. We know that we, like Peter, often have denied Christ ourselves when we perceive a threat from the world if we were to proclaim Him as Lord. We know that we too often sacrifice following what is good and right just in order to “go with the flow” of the world around us. We react to Good Friday with shame, because we know we likely would have stood at the back of the crowd silent, or worse may have joined in the fray.

As we draw closer to the cross we see the bruises left by the beatings and the gashes left by the whip, and we get a clear view of the anguish and suffering on Jesus face, we reach what is probably the most common reaction of Christians to Good Friday; guilt. If we are honest with ourselves we acknowledge that it was not the Jews or Romans that did this to Jesus. It was you and me. Our sins are why He is hanging there. The agony written across His body is the wrath of a just God falling on our innocent Lord of Love for our wrongdoing and rebellion. We know we deserve His suffering because we are the guilty ones, and we feel our guilt more heavily as we see Jesus suffering for it.

And as we draw ourselves to the very foot of the cross as Jesus breathes His last breath, we feel something else. The soldier thrusts the spear in Jesus’ side and out pours blood and water. It sprays on us and we are overcome with thankfulness and gratitude. Blood and water draws us to the familiar words “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” We remember the water of our Holy Baptism. We remember Christ’s body and blood under the bread and wine. We remember that these and the very Gospel Word of God through this crucifixion proclaim our innocence before the throne of judgment. The Son of Man, God in the flesh, came down from glory to join completely with our humanity and flesh so that He could suffer and die in our place. This is why this Friday is named “Good,” for on this day the price was paid to purchase us back into God’s favor.

Typically, this is where Christians stop on Good Friday. You can certainly understand why. What better place to be than under the grace, mercy and forgiveness pouring out from Jesus on the cross? It is most certainly the right location to place ourselves. But I would encourage you to also place yourself in another location as well.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave

himself for me.” Paul writes this in Galatians in the context of justification through Christ alone and not works of the law. But we are baptized into Christ and He is our greatest example of person pleasing to God. So on this Good Friday I encourage you to draw yourself onto the cross and into Christ hanging there.

Standing at the foot of the cross under His grace and forgiveness is good and right. But cleansed by His blood we are drawn into union with Him and His love. Our hope is that our hearts, minds and souls would be more like His. So let’s contemplate what we are in Jesus, hanging on the cross.

Jesus, the innocent Son of God hangs there in agony. He looks out upon the crowd below Him. He sees the Roman soldiers and Jewish guards who beat Him mercilessly, mocked Him with a crown of thorns that still digs into the flesh of His brow. He sees the Zealots who didn’t want forgiveness of sins, but the wealth and glory of a restored earthly empire of Israel. They deride Him as a imposter of a Messiah. He sees the smirking Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and leaders of the Jews who orchestrated His suffering and death. He sees the crowd of commoners jeering and railing against Him. He reacts, *“Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do.”*

This is where Christians travelling the entire road to the cross with Christ end up. We cannot remain standing at the foot of the cross forgiven with our backs to the world around us. Forgiven and made perfect in God’s sight, we are called on to ***be Christ*** to the world around us.

And what is it that Christ does? He forgives. He forgives those who lie about Him. He forgives those who misunderstand Him. He forgives those who harm Him without mercy. He forgives those who seek His life. He forgives those who kill Him. He doesn’t look to pick out only those who deserve His forgiveness—none could be found even if He did. He doesn’t want forgiveness only for those who love Him, only those who didn’t wrong Him. Jesus prays with a blanket prayer over everyone at the cross, *“Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do.”*

Remember this and be in Christ at this moment in all the moments of your life. I know you have been wronged. You have been harmed. You have suffered offense and injustice. Remember that Jesus did infinitely more so, in fact He did it for all the times you and I were on the wrongdoing end of things, and His perfect reaction was to forgive.

When you are angry at somebody, maybe even righteously angry by the world’s standards, struggle to be in Christ on the cross. Struggle to forgive despite the offense. Struggle to love those who seem unlovable. Struggle to be Christ to these people. Forgive not because you need to for your own sake, but because the people around you need your loving forgiveness, just as we so desperately need Christ’s. They won’t always receive it. Jesus continues to suffer rejection of His grace and mercy today. But He gave it anyway and so do we.

We don’t, can’t do this as perfectly as Jesus. That’s why it’s so wonderful to also be at the foot of the cross under the blood and water of forgiveness that continues to pour out on us each day. But be in Christ also, looking at the world from the cross, loving those who don’t love in return, suffering to forgive no matter what the offense. Reflect the great sacrifice we mark today. Reflect the unending love and forgiveness you have received. Reflect who lives in you. Reflect Christ the crucified.

Amen.