

Good Friday Homily
Friday, April 22, 2011 11:30am
Duke Chapel
Fr. Michael T. Martin OFM Conv.

Is This Why He Came?

Two weeks ago I led a group of about 100 students on a campus wide reflection on the Stations of the Cross. We processed around campus in silence carrying a large wooden cross and the Catholic Center banner and stopped at 14 different locations on campus to listen to powerful student and faculty reflections at each station. It was interesting to note the reactions of the others on campus who took notice of our presence, eyeballing us to determine how to respond or what to think as they proceeded to their destination on campus, waited for a bus, or drank a beer as part of an Alumni Weekend celebration. I couldn't help but think that this must have been the exact same notice that Christ's carrying the cross to Calvary some 2000 years ago probably garnered. Amidst the hubbub of life in Jerusalem that day, did anyone really notice at the time what was happening to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords?

Who was around to really reflect on that fateful Friday? Who was really asking deeper questions? Next to Jesus on the cross are two thieves, one of whom asks Jesus to remember him in the Kingdom. Maybe this man, the so called good thief, might have some insight. But isn't his declaration of faith merely the reflection of a man saddened by the site of an innocent person being punished unjustly. So perhaps we can look to the apostles for wisdom to understand what was being witnessed, but clearly they don't get it – they run and hide at the first sign of trouble. We are left with John, the beloved disciple, standing in support of Mary at the foot of the cross – can we imagine that he saw this in any other way than as the senseless death of a much loved friend? And then there is Mary, must not the Mother of Christ, the woman who a few years earlier had “pondered these things in her heart”, been reflecting back on that moment of Christ's birth and wondering the essential question for us today, “Is this why he came?”

We look at the Christmas crib and we reflect upon the beauty of the infant Christ Child. We are drawn to imagine all of the promise that this future King holds in his tiny hands. We imagine the lives that will be changed, the special moments that will be his, the potential in this one young life. Even then, however, there is a tinge of foreboding: gold, frankincense...and myrrh. From our Christmas Eve fireside reverie of warmth, we are yanked ahead in time and called to witness this – the broken body on a bloodied cross and we wonder and cry aloud: Is this why he came?

Jesus seems to want us here. He is not brought to this place in some surprise move that has hijacked his best made plans. He foretells his own passion on a number of occasions. He wants to go to Jerusalem, even against the protestation of those who love him. And yet in the garden he wrestles with seeing this through to its obvious conclusion – “Father, take this cup from me, but not my will but your will be done.”

So maybe looking upon the bloodied cross of Christ is too gruesome. This is why he came – for us to gaze upon his broken body? To see the Crucifixion without Easter Sunday is pointless suffering. However, to run to the resurrection without appreciating what is happening in the Crucifixion is to fail to understand or appreciate the heart and nature of a broken world and Christ's saving act. We want to see the empty tomb so much, because we balk at the prospect that suffering can be redemptive. If you wonder about the truth of that statement in our culture, simply watch the nightly news and see the many formulas for suffering remediation that are literally being shoved down our throat. So how do we meditate upon the suffering of Christ in a way that helps us to understand why he came?

Today's service is not so that we can look upon the battered cross and lament that it is our sins that placed him there. That is not why He came. He did not come to allow his gift to fill us with regret – there is no love in that gift. Rather, his death calls us to examine the cross in our own lives, with a different optic. While too many voices even within Christianity today shy away from a hard look at the cross as too negative, we rather appreciate that offering your life – the greatest gift you have – for the sake of others is the ultimate positive. Is not the cross, then, the crucial sign of love that must frame all of our choices? Isn't that why he came?

There are so many gathered here today who not only ask this deeper question of Christ's suffering, but more personally ask it of their own. The young undergrad whose addiction to internet pornography washes him over with waves of shame and he wonders "Is this why I came?" The grad student whose relationships have only ended in hurt, questions what must be wrong with her that makes her so unlovable and she cries out "Is this why I came?" The biopsy report that recently came back placed the word cancer and your name in the same sentence, causing rage and fear, anguish and uncertainty in ways which can only lead to the cry "Is this why I came?" And there are those, not here present, but united with us in spirit the world around who suffer from the exploitation of dictators in places like Libya and North Korea, from the hunger of homelessness in Durham, and from the horror of natural disasters in Japan, Haiti and Bertie County North Carolina and with them we cry out "Is this why we came?"

My brothers and sisters, to accept the crosses in our lives for the love of Christ and the rest of humanity is to participate in the redemptive act of Christ on the cross. Too often we look upon our broken lives and our broken relationships and think that somehow we were just dealt a bad hand. We isolate ourselves in our troubles, sometimes believing that I am the only one carrying the cross, blinded to the fact that there are others being crucified alongside me. Failing to appreciate that like Simon the Cyrene, we can help someone else carry their cross even though we already have enough to worry about on our own. Good Friday is not a vertical exercise of spiritual privacy. We are challenged to look around and see who is on the cross right next to us, recognizing that the Body of Christ was wounded in many places. And yet we run from the difficulties of our lives, like the apostles to the upper room, believing that if we hide from it long enough, it will go away. Good Friday is a call to stop running: to embrace the

dimensions of our lives, personally and communally, where we struggle most. This is why he came!

We are invited to climb upon the crosses of our lives no matter how difficult that may be. We are invited to give witness to the selfless love that is the love between the Father and the Son, a love that is willing to not let the cup pass. A love that is powerful enough to overcome whatever issues weigh us down. This is why he came

To accept the difficulties of life is not to accept a death sentence meted out by an unsympathetic Father, the answer that the world gives to suffering it cannot understand. Accepting suffering is rather an invitation to love more deeply like a Father who is willing to offer his only Son for the sake of us all. That is the heart of the countercultural message of this Good Friday. This is why he came.

We do not climb on our cross alone today. Christ climbs on it with us. This is why He came. This is why we came.