

During worship on Good Friday, we recall the arrest of Jesus and we observe the kangaroo court that tried, convicted, and sentenced him, an innocent man, to death. On Good Friday we witness the crucifixion of Jesus, a torturous execution of incomparable brutality.

Altogether, it is a disturbing spectacle that Christians remember on Good Friday and is only bearable because we know that Easter follows Good Friday. We know that Jesus' suffering and death was not the end of the story. We know that the death of Jesus did not signal the death of God, as Jesus' followers must have feared on that horrible day. We know that Jesus' death will be followed by his resurrection, and that Jesus' ascent to eternal life is our hope for experiencing eternal life.

Is that what you believe, in your heart of heart and soul of soul, that when this life has ended there is another life that awaits you? A belief based on the knowledge that Jesus has gone on ahead of us, and that Jesus died and was resurrected from the dead as a sign to us that the end of this life does not mark our end, but only a new beginning.

But I am getting ahead of ourselves, because today is still only Good Friday, and we should not get in too big a hurry to put the somber seriousness of Good Friday behind us by rushing ahead prematurely to the good news of Easter. We should not get in too big a hurry to leave the difficult images of Good Friday behind, because the simple truth is, we cannot avoid suffering and sorrow in this life. While none of us wishes to suffer and sorrow, and indeed all of us devote a great deal of our life trying to avoid suffering and sorrow, the silver lining in the dark cloud is that our suffering, or even our awareness of suffering, sometimes becomes the beginning of some of life's greatest beauties. Because suffering can – and I emphasize 'can' because there is no guarantee – suffering can create in us God-given acts of courage, and attitudes of tenderness, and expressions of pity, and assurances of faith, and demonstrations of patience.

As a case in point, here are some of the most remarkable words that I think ever were written. They were found scratched on the wall of a Nazi concentration camp – a death camp of horrors – after it was liberated at the end of the Second World War. The words scratched into the wall formed this prayer:

“Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will but all those of ill will. Do not only remember all the suffering that our captors have subjected us to. Remember as well the fruits that we brought forth thanks to this suffering. Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage and generosity, the greatness of heart that all this suffering inspired. And when our captors come to judgment, let all these fruits we have borne be their reward and their forgiveness.”

It is an incredible statement, an amazing prayer. If ever there were people justified in thinking they had been abandoned by God and wanting revenge, it was the doomed inhabitants of the Nazi death camps. Yet the anonymous author of that prayer demonstrated that even as he or she prepared for their bodily death, they had not succumbed to a spiritual death.

On Good Friday, we observe again that Jesus underwent a bodily death. On Good Friday, we hope that Jesus did not undergo a spiritual death as well. Because if he did, then there is absolutely no hope for us.

Today we just read a description of an execution that occurred 2,000 years ago. Some time ago I watched again a movie about another execution that I first saw when it was made 27 years ago. The movie is “Dead Man Walking.” The movie's story is adapted from the book of the same title that was written by Helen Prejean, a Roman Catholic nun who at one difficult point in her career served as a spiritual adviser to some convicts on death row.

It is a stark and disturbing film that tells the story of the final days of a death row inmate in a Louisiana prison. His name is Matthew Poncelet and he is a convicted rapist and murderer. He is also a foul mouthed racist and bigot. There is absolutely nothing appealing about Matthew Poncelet. He comes across as irredeemable. He is the exact opposite of Jesus.

Poncelet insists that he is innocent of the horrific crimes for which he was convicted, and he is entirely unrepentant. Not until a few hours before his death, does he finally come clean and admit to, and apologize for, his crimes. On the day of his execution by lethal injection he takes the last short walk of his life from his jail cell to the execution chamber. He is escorted by several burly guards, one of whom announces matter-of-factly as they move along the prison corridor that he is accompanying a “dead man walking.” All of Poncelet’s appeals for a stay of execution have been denied. No court, no judge, no government official, no parole board will overrule the death sentence. Nothing stands between Poncelet and death by lethal injection. He is in fact a ‘dead man walking.’

At the hour of his execution, the doomed prisoner has only one person to whom he can turn. It is the nun, Sister Helen Prejean. Sister Helen had been living and working among the inner-city poor when an unusual series of circumstances resulted in her becoming Poncelet’s spiritual guide over the last week of his life, a role for which she felt totally unprepared. By the way, have you ever found yourself in a particularly difficult, stress-filled situation, wondering how you can possibly rise to the occasion and do what needs to be done, only to find that somehow you mustered the deep inner strength and courage and resolve to do what needed to be done?

When the procession of prisoner and guards is only feet away from the execution chamber, Sister Helen manages to halt its advance just long enough to look into the now terrified face of Poncelet and tell him one last thing. She tells the ‘dead man walking’ that when they strap him to the gurney, and stick the needle in his arm, and pull back the curtain to the viewing room where the parents of his victims and other witnesses along with Sister Helen will be observing his execution, to “Look at me, Matthew.” She says, “When you are on the gurney, I want you to look at me. I want you to look into the face of love.”

Poncelet is then strapped to the gurney which is then raised on end so that he can face the witnesses, his arms outstretched as if he was to be crucified. He confesses his last words of sorrow to the parents of his victims for the ghastly crime he has committed. The gurney is lowered back down to its horizontal position, the executioner flicks on the injection switch which pours first sedative and then poison into Poncelet’s veins. In the final moments of his life, Poncelet turns his head and looks into the face of Sister Helen Prejean, who is the face of love, the face of Jesus, and he dies.

On Good Friday, we recall Jesus’ execution. The scriptures never speak of a Roman guard announcing “dead man walking” as Jesus made his way to the place of execution, carrying his own cross. But I wonder if Jesus had a face of love to look at as he breathed his last.

I am drawn to the character of Sister Helen in this otherwise grim story because she confronted her own fears and frailties to offer the justly condemned man the only thing she knew how to give, which was her assurance of God’s love.

Today, on Good Friday, during this most sombre of Christian observances, I urge you never to give up on God when life takes a difficult turn. More than that, I urge you to become the voice that encourages others not to give up on God during their times of doubt and fear and anger and confusion and forsakenness. Or if they already have given up on God, or given up on the idea that God even exists, I urge you to be the voice that encourages others to give God a chance.

As Christians we believe that in the crucifixion of Jesus, God was sharing human suffering, human anguish, a very human experience of rejection and condemnation. The Christian belief is that God is not remote and unconcerned about us, and about the affairs of the world. The Christian faith declares that God is one with us and knows our sorrow and our joy.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian, once said that if there is one thing that unites us Christians, it is our forgetting – our overlooking – how much we have been loved by God in Christ. Kierkegaard said that we are united not by what we have done or left undone. We are united not by what we have believed or not believed. We Christians, sadly, are united in not remembering with what great love we have been loved in Christ.

So today, on this Good Friday and in the days ahead, I urge you to prove Kierkegaard wrong, by remembering. By remembering that Jesus' awful death is our assurance that God never gives up on us. Remembering that the face of love, the face of God, can be seen all around us, if only we will look to see it. And remembering, that we must never give up on God and what God can do for us in our times of greatest need and difficulty. **Amen.**

**Good Friday**

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