

The God Who Speaks

11: Remembering the Dark Times

Opening Prayer and Welcome

God our loving Father,
You made us your children in baptism.
Pour out on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit.
Help us as a parish to know the paths we must follow
so as to build up your kingdom.
Teach us to grow in faith,
to encourage one another with words of hope,
and to care for your family with love.
Let us bear witness to the Good News,
and be faithful followers of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever.
Amen

Introduction to the Theme

You would think that the image of the crucifix - of Jesus hanging dead, or dying - on the cross, would be the oldest Christian image there is. But, in fact, it was nearly a thousand years after Jesus' death that this image began to be used - first of all by monks, then later in churches and then more and more commonly so that many Catholic families had a crucifix at home. It was, of course, a help in guiding prayer, but it took a very long time for the Church to be able to look at the image of Jesus on a cross without flinching: it was just too much.

Early Christian symbols - like those found in the catacombs around Rome - were images of a young man, clean-shaven (as was the Roman custom): Jesus in the prime of life, glowing with life; or the secret symbol of the fish, which represented a play on words meaning 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour', was the earliest Christian image, first appearing perhaps a hundred years after Jesus' death.

But the crucifix, which seems so normal to us, has only been with us for about a thousand years. When did you last *really* look at a crucifix? When did you really spend time just *looking*?

Scripture Reading

Matthew 27:45-52 (NRSVACE)

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks

were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

Discussion

*You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

What do you feel when you listen to this gospel passage?

Why, do you think, the image of Jesus on the cross was not embraced by the Church sooner after Jesus' death?

What does the image of Jesus on a cross mean to you?

What does the image say about suffering?

A quiet reflection

Close your eyes and remain in quiet for a little while. Ask yourself if you can feel God's Presence right now. Or perhaps you can think back to something that happened today, or yesterday, that - on reflection - says to you that God is near, perhaps that God has spoken to you. Or it could be in a memory that comes to mind, where you can say, perhaps, that God was close?

See if you can picture it in your mind: a hill, a desolate place, the sounds of suffering, a few wary bystanders. And Jesus cries out to his Father, 'Why have you abandoned me?'

How are we to feel?

Should our response be gratitude? And can we say for what we are grateful?

Should we feel sorry for Jesus? Or angry?

Or do we quickly look beyond it to the resurrection and a happy ending?

The image of Jesus on the cross can raise a lot of feelings and it isn't a matter of deciding what are the 'right' feelings or not.

And my - our - response to what we see is crucial: this moment is most clearly where God's foolishness is greater than our wisdom. We want resurrection, new life, possibilities, *hope*; but God points us towards a bigger reality: yes, life has hope and new possibilities, but it also has real suffering, and some of us know that very, very clearly.

This is the moment when God speaks to us in our experience.

Our experience of being alone, of abandonment, of pain.

We cannot say that it's alright for God because God is above all these kinds of things, so why should God care?: God says to us here, *it is not alright for you or for me, but that's the reality of life.*

Scripture Reading

Philippians 2:1-11 (NRSVACE)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Discussion

We often find the writings of Saint Paul really difficult, so perhaps his letter to the Christians in Philippi (because it is friendly, chatty - and short!) is a relief. It's also one of the earliest Christian texts, since it was probably written about 25 years after Jesus' death - earlier than even the oldest of the gospels, Mark, which probably dates from around eight or ten years later (and, so, nearly thirty-five years after Jesus' death).

The scripture reading here gives us a lot to consider: Paul gives some very clear and helpful teaching, but also quotes an early Church hymn which tells us that these first Christian communities established by Paul understood clearly both the divine - as well as the human - nature of Jesus, but also how his suffering was a kind of *emptying* (the old Greek word is 'kenosis').

*You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

*What do you think this hymn tells us about Jesus, and about suffering?
What do these words say to you? How do you feel when you hear them?
Do you notice the 'down' and then 'up' movement described in the poem? Do you recognise it in your own life?*

The Church Teaches

**'Jesus enters Jerusalem in order to die on the cross. And it is precisely here that his kingship shines forth in godly fashion: his royal throne is the wood of the cross!
Why the cross? Because Jesus takes upon himself the evil, the filth, the sin of the world, including the sin of all of us, and he cleanses it, he cleanses it with his blood, with the mercy and the love of God. Let us look around: how many wounds are inflicted upon humanity by evil! Wars, violence, economic conflicts that hit the weakest, greed for money that you can't take with you and have to leave. When we were small, our grandmother used to say, 'a shroud has no pocket'. Love of power, corruption, divisions, crimes against human life and against creation! And - as each one of us knows and is aware - our personal sins: our failures in love and respect towards God, towards our neighbour, and towards the whole of creation. Jesus on the cross feels the whole weight of the evil, and with the force of God's love he conquers it, he defeats it with his resurrection. This is the good that Jesus does for us on the throne of the cross! Christ's cross embraced with love never leads to sadness, but to joy, to the joy of having been saved and of doing a little of what he did on the day of his death'.
(Pope Francis, Homily on Palm Sunday, 24 March 2013)**

*Read this passage again and sit with it for a short while in silence.
Then feel free to share with one another the thoughts that come to your heart.*

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Father, for this time of reflection.
We ask you to give us a fresh understanding of your Presence in our lives.
Strengthen us, we pray, in our faith
Help us to be present to each moment
So that we may see You and hear Your Voice
Everywhere and in all things and all people.
Give us hearts and minds that seek the face of Jesus,
And help us, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
To be always grateful for your blessings,
For the gracious gift of Your Presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ
In the unity of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading suggestions

Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., UK edition (31 Mar. 2014)

See if you can find the poem *Footprints in the Sand*, or - another poem - *Desiderata* (this latter was written by Max Ehrmann in 1927 and became a popular song in the 1970s).