

Good Friday – The Passion of the Lord

“Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...”

Who among us has not *trembled* in these last weeks? Maybe it’s simply been the long exhale of a worried sigh. Perhaps it’s been a distracted reply to a loved one: *“What? Yeah, sure, of course, whatever.”* Or maybe it’s been an existential cry of anguish prayerfully directed at God: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken...us?”*

When we allowed a smudge to be wiped across our brows on Ash Wednesday, we acknowledged that our mortal bodies are made from earthy dust and unto this earthy dust our bodies shall return. We pledged ourselves to the ancient three-fold disciplines of the season – prayer, fasting and almsgiving – as symbolic sacrificial gestures to remind us of this awareness. And through our exercise of these gestures, we committed ourselves to faithfully accompany Jesus from that ashy cross to the wooden cross of his crucifixion.

Today, we honor Jesus’ passion. Good Friday reminds us that, as baptized Christians, we live in the shadow of his cross. An ancient instrument of torture is now, oddly, the premier symbol of our faith, proclaiming the full surrender by our incarnate God to the utter folly of our human condition: *“Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the savior of the world.”*

In our prayer today, let us focus not so much on Jesus’ physical suffering but rather on his self-giving act of personal surrender to the human condition. And if we are truly *com-passionate* people, then we are willing to be with him in this moment of surrender. There is nothing that we can *do* for him today other than to *be* with him in this most humble moment of his mortal anguish. If we are truly the Body of Christ then we are willing to be with the body of Jesus. May our moments of prayer today respect and honor this quiet stillness of presence to which we are called. Today is a day for us simply to be with the one we have come to love – Jesus.

“Were you there when they...?”

Suggestions for your times of prayer

+ Slowly read one of the Gospel Passion Narratives in its entirety.

+ Read a Passion Narrative but, as you do so, shift the focus and address it personally to your friend Jesus. Read it quietly to yourself but substitute that word “*you*” instead of “*he*” and allow yourself to linger in the intimacy of your friendship.

+ Contemplate experiential “scenes” within the Passion Narrative (i.e.: the betrayal in the garden, the meal and the institution of the Eucharist, the washing of the feet, the agony and the trials, Peter’s denials, the way of the cross, the crucifixion, Jesus’ death, the burial, etc.). Imagine the scene and allow the Holy Spirit to invite you into the scene.

+ Imagine the Passion Narrative through the eyes of the Blessed Mother Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, and pray the *Stabat Mater* or listen to a musical setting of the poem, such as by the Baroque composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (which can easily be found on YouTube)

+ Be attentive to the various crucifixes you have hanging on the walls in your home. How is Jesus represented on any given cross? What feelings are elicited within you by any differences you notice in the depictions of Jesus’ “passion” moment? Below is a photograph of what is often called “the smiling Christ” – the crucifix that hangs in the family chapel in the castle in Spain where the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier was born and a poem to accompany the image.



A CRUCIFIED SMILE

Stretched
between heaven and earth
on crossed wood,
Jesus the anointed one,
surprises the universe
with an unexpected smile!
A face not wracked with pain
but peaceful and serene.

Why that deep hint of a radical smile
when the tears of agony
are still flowing,
baptizing the ground that once birthed the tree?

Why this seeming festival of joy in the midst of despair?
Do you not see the thick darkness of death?

Death is only a part of a circle,
not yet complete!
With life we are assured death but
with death we are assured life.

Why not let the gentle smile flow
this Good Friday
to flow in abundance from the wood of the cross
into our daily lives of cruciform shape
waking us all up to our own anointing!

Philip Chircop SJ

+ Finally, as Christians, we also live not only in the shadow of the cross but also in the shadow of the manger. In the manger, Jesus comes to us as an infant who, wrapped in swaddling clothes, can neither speak nor move on his own. He needs us to *speak* on his behalf and to *hand on* to others the hope-filled promises of God's kingdom. The manger and the cross...both reveal a God who loves us, and it is this God we are called to adore this day. The contemporary poet Barrie Shepherd reminds us this truth in his poem *The Silent Seers*...

Of all the witnesses/around that holy manger/perhaps it was the animals/who best knew what lay ahead./For they had already/paced along the aching roads,/slept in the wet and hungry fields,/known the sharp sting of sticks/and thorns and curses,/of derisions and endured/the constant bruise of burdens/not their own,/and the way of His kind to use/and then discard rather than meet/and pay the debt of gratitude./For them the future also held/the knacker's rope, the butcher's blade/the tearing of their bodies/for gracing a graceless race./In the shadows of that stable,/might it be His warmest welcome/lay within their quiet comprehending gaze?

Fr. William Campbell S.J.