

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Preached October 21, 2018; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

“This is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. *Do this in remembrance of me.*”

Many people mistake these words and think we are supposed to be remembering the Last Supper, but we are supposed to be remembering Jesus, who came *not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*. He gave his life as a ransom when nailed to the Cross he poured out his Precious Blood, the price of our redemption.

At the Mass we renew that same offering in an unbloody fashion, but as we do so we need to remember just what Jesus did when he gave his life as a ransom for many.

The movie *The Passion of the Christ* set before our eyes the graphic details of Jesus' suffering and death, but those graphic details are rooted in the sober narratives of the Gospels. Without going into graphic details it will be good to review the sober basics.

First there is the basic physical suffering. No doubt Jesus was roughly handled by the soldiers who arrested him. He was struck by a temple guard and indeed hit and slapped by the members of the Sanhedrin after they had condemned him. All that was just preliminary for his being brutally scourged by the Roman soldiers, crowned with thorns, loaded with a heavy beam that would serve as the cross-beam of the cross to which he was nailed.

Death on a cross is a death by slow asphyxiation. The whole process is accompanied by an intense thirst. The downward weight of the body makes it impossible to breath so that the crucified man must continually push up from nailed feet and pull on his nailed hands in order to breath. Once his strength is gone and he can no longer push and pull himself up, then he can no longer breathe. Death by asphyxiation is one of the most painful deaths possible.

That was just the raw physical suffering that Jesus underwent. To that we need to add the humiliation to which he was subject, which was both verbal and physical. He was mocked by the Sanhedrin; he was mocked and struck by the Roman soldiers when they crowned him with thorns; he was mocked as he hung naked upon the Cross by the chief priests and Pharisees, by the two men crucified with him, and even by those passing by.

Jesus also suffered from those who were close to him. Judas, one of his chosen apostles, betrayed him with a kiss, the sign of love, while the Peter, the leader among them, denied him three times, and the others fled in fear. He had to behold the grief of his Mother as she stood by him at the foot of the Cross.

Though innocent, Jesus heard the testimony of false witnesses who twisted his words and he was condemned for blasphemy by the highest religious authority in Israel. Then, after proclaiming his innocence, Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to death.

That, we can, say is a brief summary of the human aspect of Jesus' suffering. To that we can add the divine illumination that he received in his human mind and will. That divine illumination prevented him from experiencing any of the numbness and insensitivity that often mitigates human suffering. Rather he underwent that suffering moment by moment with the highest awareness and sensitivity.

He also underwent that suffering with the highest sense of purpose. He knew exactly why he was suffering. He not only knew the betrayals, sins, and failures of those actually present, but he also beheld through the mirror of his divine knowledge, every single human sin from the sin of Adam to the end of the world, for which he was shedding his Precious Blood. As he gave his life on the Cross he saw my sins and he saw your sins. Nothing was hidden from the gaze of the human soul of the Son of God.

As we heard in the prophecy of Isaiah: *through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.* In fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah he offered himself freely for love of us as a sacrifice of expiation for sin, to atone for the sin of Adam and every human sin committed from beginning to end. (cf. Jn 10:17-18)

So just as St. John writes that the *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son*, (Jn 3:16), so St. Paul writes, *Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God.* (Eph 5:2) And he makes it more personal when he writes, *I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me.* (Gal 2:20)

The same sacrificial will by which Jesus offered himself upon the Cross is present in each offering of the Mass.

And Jesus says, and we hear at every Mass, *Do this in remembrance of me.*

When we remember what Jesus has done for love of us, what he has suffered for love of us, then we begin to take sin seriously.

We tend to think lightly of sin. We tend to be dismissive of sin. Yes, we are shocked and outraged by the horrific crimes that others commit, but when it comes to our

own sins, we think, “No big deal.” Jesus’ sufferings tell us that yes it is a big deal; it is such a big deal that he had to suffer in this way to expiate our sins before God.

When we remember what Jesus has done for love of us, what he freely suffered for love of us, when we accept that, then our hearts will be filled with gratitude. The Greek word for gratitude is ‘eucharist’. Gratitude leads us to want to give back. Just as Jesus offered himself to the Father as a sacrifice for sin, so out of gratitude, in the Holy Eucharist, we offer ourselves, our lives to Jesus. Placing ourselves at his service, we then want to serve also our brothers and sisters in Christ, fulfilling his command, *Love one another as I have loved you.* (Jn 13:34)

Offering our lives to Jesus also means sharing in his own suffering. In today’s Gospel Jesus redirects the ambition of James and John who want seats of power by inviting them to share his ‘baptism’ and to drink of his ‘cup’. When we were baptized we were baptized into the death of Christ. (cf. Rm 6:3-4) And of course when we receive communion, it is communion with the Blood of Christ, poured out for our sins. Jesus’ baptism and Jesus’ cup are his suffering and death. If love holds all things in common, then those who truly love Jesus want to share in his suffering and death.

So St. Paul writes: *I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church.* (Col 1:24) The sufferings of Christ were complete and sufficient to accomplish our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, but they were not complete in us the members of his body, who have been given the grace to share in the work of our own salvation.

The greatest gift of Christ’s love is to be invited to share in his suffering, to drink from his chalice. Every physical suffering that we must undergo, small or great, is such an invitation from the love of Christ; everything that contradicts our own will, small or great, is such an invitation from the love of Christ.

We cannot pass through this life without suffering and in the end we must all die. Truly, though, the greatest suffering in this life is the suffering of meaninglessness and the feeling of uselessness. The greatest suffering is what we might call ‘wasted suffering’, suffering without meaning and purpose. We cannot give meaning to our suffering; we cannot manufacture meaning for ourselves; meaning must be rooted in reality, in truth. Jesus Christ is the Truth. When we learn to unite our suffering to the suffering of Christ, when we learn to offer our sufferings, small or great, through, with, and in him, then our suffering will never be meaningless or useless, our suffering will never be wasted.

Then we will begin to learn from Jesus, who is truly meek and humble of heart. Then we will take the yoke of his Cross upon our shoulders, discover his presence with us, and learn that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, for love makes the hardest things to be easy. (cf. Mt 11:28-30)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.