

Good Friday Message
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Our Good Friday celebration gives us the blessed opportunity of meditating more deeply on the mystery of God's great love for us in Jesus. Today's reading from John's Gospel provides a backdrop for our meditation. I'd like to focus on the reaction of three of Jesus' disciples presented in this reading, their reaction to the drama of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, the reaction of Peter, of Judas, and of John.

All three had heard the same teachings of Jesus. They had walked with Him, talked with Him, and questioned Him over a three year period. And when the final test of their discipleship, their loyalty, occurs, the three have different responses.

Judas is described in the Gospel today as Jesus' betrayer. He had gotten together the band of soldiers and guards of their chief priests and the Pharisees to turn Jesus over to them. We learn from Matthew's Gospel that Judas eventually takes his life.

After Jesus' arrest, when Peter was questioned about being one of Jesus' disciples, he denies that he is. Peter later acknowledges his cowardice and repents.

John is the only disciple who joins the women at the foot of the cross. All the others flee.

This Gospel gets played out in the degree of faithfulness we ourselves display in the face of the struggles to allegiance that occur each day of our lives.

We may be tempted to despair as Judas was and see no hope of ever being forgiven. The message of God's mercy was not quite heard because we were too preoccupied with our own sinfulness and failed to hear the message of God's love. Pope Benedict, in commenting on the Sacrament of Penance recently urged priests and seminarians to make the Sacrament of Penance a time for sinners to feel God's merciful love. On March 7 of this year, he said that "Sin does not lie at the heart of sacramental celebration, but rather God's mercy, which is infinitely greater than each of our faults."

Because Judas didn't take that same message of Jesus to heart, he saw no solution but suicide. He had probably heard the beautiful parable of Jesus on the prodigal son and the forgiving father, but the message hadn't penetrated his heart.

In Peter's case it did. He had to have been shattered by his disloyalty to Jesus. But most importantly he was repentant and sought the mercy of God, which Jesus extended to him.

John was the only truly loyal of the 12 disciples, who courageously found his way to the cross, with the courageous women. He surmounted his fear of execution, and he alone was never to be martyred. A strange coincidence, considering he was the only courageous one of the 12.

I usually wear as my pectoral cross, the Cross of San Damiano, a depiction that St. Francis meditated on when he was in the midst of his conversion in the Church of San Damiano in Assisi.

One reason I like it is that it reminds me of the people who stayed with Jesus at the foot of His cross. They never abandoned him.

In an address on February 25 of this year, Pope Benedict spoke to the Pontifical Academy for Life on life issues, and he said that “No believer should die in loneliness and neglect.”

He noted how Mother Teresa of Calcutta took special care “To gather the poor and the forsaken so that they might experience the Father’s warmth in the embrace of sisters and brothers, at least at the moment of death.”

The pope pointed out that not only the Christian community, due to its particular bonds of supernatural communion, “is committed to accompanying and celebrating in its members the mystery of suffering and death and the dawn of new life. The whole of society, in fact, is required through its health-care and civil institutions to respect the life and dignity of the seriously sick and the dying.”

The pope said that “Our entire society, and in particular the sectors linked to medical science, are bound to express the solidarity of love and the safeguard and respect of human life at every moment of its earthly development, especially when it is suffering a condition of sickness or is in its terminal stage.”

Jesus had that kind of care, fortunately, by a few who came to His aid in His final moments on this earth. Because John was there when He needed him, to him the Lord entrusted the care of His mother. Jesus knew he could rely on at least one of His disciples, to the end.

May our meditations today help us, first of all, to reflect on God’s mercy. Good Friday is principally about taking that message from this church today. Of all human beings only Jesus and Mary were always without sin. All the rest of humanity are sinners in need of redemption. Jesus realized that on Calvary. He even acknowledged that the people killing Him didn’t know what they were doing.

Like Peter, we are invited to experience that power of God’s merciful love. Some of you will be praying the Divine Mercy Novena these nine days to deepen your experience of God’s merciful love. Hopefully all of us have experienced God’s merciful love in the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Lenten Season or will do so soon.

We also are summoned to bring Christ’s compassionate love to the sick, terminally ill, and dying, as the Disciple John did and the women at the foot of the cross. As the pope suggested, “No one should die neglected.”

Some of you know of my concern for a place for the priests of our diocese, when they are seriously ill or lack mobility, so that they do not end up dying alone, as some have died in recent years.

May this Good Friday help us rediscover God’s tremendous merciful love and the invitation from Calvary to show compassion to those who might have no one to help them face the prospect of death.

Thank you, Lord, for your messages of mercy and compassion spoken to us from the cross on Calvary.