

## *Why Death on a Cross?*

### **Homily for Good Friday at St. Paul Cathedral 2018**

*Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42*

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Peace be with you.

Why? Why the cross? Why did Jesus have to die on a cross? Spiritual writer Gil Baile responded this way to a group of high school-aged youth: “Jesus dies in a bloody big screen production, so you don’t have to live in one.”

What is Gil Baile getting at here? Because crosses and crucifixes are so commonly sold as decorations and jewelry it’s easy to forget that the crucifixion was the worst kind of condemnation to death. Crucifixion meant being pinned to a cross, totally naked and exposed. To stay upright and keep from suffocating to death the victim would need to rock up and down on the ankles and wrists. The scourging prior to crucifixion assured that once fixed to the cross, the scent of the victim’s blood would attract vultures that would pick away at the fresh flesh. Victims would last from hours to days, slowly dehydrating and becoming asphyxiated. It was a painful, tortuous and excruciating way to die. Indeed, our English word “excruciating” comes from the Latin “ex cruce” – literally “from the cross.” Perhaps this is why the famous Cicero speaks of crucifixion as “the most cruel and disgusting punishment.” (*See Michael Lacona in The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach 2010 Inter-Varsity Press p. 304*).

Why? Why the production? Why couldn’t God have just offered a word of forgiveness and blithely solved the world’s evil and sin without all the blood and all the gore? That’s the question the young monk Boso raised to St. Anselm of Canterbury back in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as well. Anselm’s response is quite telling. Anselm says to the young Boso by stating: “You have not considered the weight of sin.”

“You have not considered the weight of sin.” That’s a statement not only for young Boso to consider but each and every one of us. Have I considered the weight of sin? Have you considered the weight of sin?

Permit me to share a story of a real situation from two years ago. A young mom here in the Lower Valley who worked in a fruit packing plant went home to Mexico to care for her ailing mother, leaving her husband to care for the children for a few weeks. Yet while she was there she was kidnapped. The kidnapers sent up a ransom note to the family demanding a five-digit figure. Her co-workers took up a collection at the fruit packing plant, raising about half the amount of money demanded by the kidnapers. The kidnapers told the family to wire down whatever they had pulled together. A few days later a trash bag arrived on the front step of the family home in their rural Mexican village. It had a note. The note stated that inside the bag was half the dead body of this mother from the Yakima Valley. When they get the other half of the money they’d get the other half of the body. This is raw evil. This is gross grave and mortal sin.

Our wired world brings us instant images of horrific human suffering: the bombing of civilians in Homs, Syria, the millions of migrants and refugees fleeing hunger and war, the random gun shootings in our schools, the kidnapping of school girls in Nigeria, the carnage of a global abortion industry, women forced into poverty with few options.

Public policy is important. Better policing is important. Better visa control is important. Better border security is important. Improved legislation is important. Better firearm background checks are important. Immigration reform is important. An international community responsive to human rights violations is important. Yet what St. Anselm is suggesting to young Boso is that none of our well-intentioned attempts at human fairness will get at the deeply dysfunctional roots of evil and sin.

We need God. We need a savior who comes to us in the particularity of our suffering, our evil and our sin. Note well what happens on the cross on Good Friday. God does not deal with sin from afar with a casual word of forgiveness for His killers. God forgives precisely in the midst of a tortuous death. In Jesus, God gets personally involved. He works with sin and evil from the inside. Or as the famous spiritual writer C.S. Lewis puts it: God sneaks into our world behind enemy lines. He grows up behind enemy lines to battle the world's dysfunction and sin.

Why the cross? Why this particular instrument of torture? St. Augustine notes that God in his omnipotence could have taken away all human suffering, all human sin and every kind of evil. But, Augustine proposes, God does something better. He brings good out of evil. He makes saints out of sinners. He creates martyrs from the persecuted. God brings life out of death. He does so in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the good news of Good Friday. Whatever our sin, whatever our suffering, whatever our fear, whatever evil we confront, whatever family feud, whatever sickness, whatever health challenge, whatever legal problem, whatever personal plight we face – tonight we bring it to the cross. We bring it to the cross as we reverence the cross. We do so knowing that Christ has already born our pain and faced our sin. We do so knowing that God can do what we cannot. We do so confident that God can work with any situation from the inside, behind enemy lines so that someday – even a day we may never see – God will bring good out of evil and life out of death.

Why did Jesus have to die in a bloody big screen production? So, we don't have to live in one any more.

Peace be with you!