

Died for our Sins

Homily for Palm Sunday 2020

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Peace be with you! Why did Jesus have to die? That's the front-end question young Boso asks his teacher St. Anselm. Only when young Boso asks this question of St. Anselm he is not simply asking why Jesus had to die. No. Young Boso's back-end question is much deeper. Boso seems deeply disturbed by the details of the death so graphically sketched in our Gospels. Why did Jesus have to die tortured to death? Why did he have to die as a common criminal pinned to a cross? Why did he have to die beaten to a bloody pulp so that when nailed to the cross the scent of his blood would attract vultures who would pick at his flesh?

Do we not have a parallel question similar to young Boso? Do we not feel that we are being crucified with the COVID-19 virus through no fault of our own? Why? Why me? Why the loss of my income? Why the loss of my mobility? Why the isolation?

St. Anselm's response to Boso is very telling. He says: "You have not considered the gravity of sin." What St. Anselm is getting at here is that in the bloody death of Jesus Christ on the cross we have a sacrifice that not only meets but exceeds any sin of the world. Jesus – innocent and without sin – descends into the most God-forsaken reaches of our world.

In short, it is for times like these – right now with the COVID-19 crisis – that Jesus dies and rises. What St. Anselm emphasizes in his lesson to young Boso is that there is not a single corner of creation that escapes the power of Jesus and his death on the cross. There is no suffering, no sorrow, no struggle, no strife and no sickness where God has not trod through the death of his Son on the cross. Jesus even descends into hell. It's a truth we pray every Sunday in the Creed.

I was struck by the descent by our God made flesh – Jesus Christ – into the depths of sin and depravity after my visit to Pajacuarán, Mexico a few years ago. It was the first Mass of our own Fr. Lalo Barragan. I had just ordained him a priest. During the reception after his first Mass, I got to experience the "Dance of the Judases." Recall that in the coming daily Mass Gospels on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, the Gospel centers on Judas and his betrayal of Jesus.

To commemorate these Holy Week scriptures, the folkloric dancers of Pajacuarán dress up as little "Judases." They dance every Holy Week every year to commemorate the descent of Jesus into hell. Because they are good dancers, they repeat the performance at every major celebration during the year – including at the reception following the first Mass of Fr. Lalo Barragan. There they were in front of me in front of the plaza of the church. They all danced in front of me keeping rhythm with their little bags of silver. One even opened up his bag and insisted that I put some of my silver into his bag. He wouldn't leave me alone until I did! I thought to myself, "I'm the

bishop! I'm the one who runs the collection baskets!" I also wondered "What kind of pagan ritual is this?"

But then it dawned on me. This dance celebrates the salvific power of God. Jesus even descends into hell. Thus, even Judas can dance.

Now I am not saying that no one is in hell. My dark side has a list of nominees for hell! Perhaps you do too! But – and this is key – salvation is always available at all times and in every place if our hearts are open. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes (634-5) "The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment ... Christ went down to the depths of death so that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. Jesus the author of life by dying destroyed him who has the power of death, that is, the devil and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

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.

That is our hope too. Suffering remains a mystery. Ultimately there is no answer to the question: "Why?" But in the face of suffering we can meditate on the many ways "good" has come out of its proximity to the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic: the thank-you cards by school children for medical personnel at our hospitals, the words and acts of gratitude for our first responders, the heroism of our doctors and nurses assisting those with grave illnesses, the long hours of our health department personnel contacting those exposed to COVID-19. The list could go on!

As bishop I am personally grateful to the many people who responded to our launch this week of our online giving campaign "The Light of Hope." I am grateful to see how the COVID-19 crisis evokes generous donations for our many working families in need but lacking unemployment insurance or other financial resources right now. There are so many ways we can see today the insight of St. Augustine, that good can grow precisely because of its proximity to evil.

My hope and prayer this week is that you can meditate on the good that has grown as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also hope that having meditated on the good, as you gaze upon the crucified Christ this Holy Week, your prayer might echo the words of the Roman centurion we heard in today's Gospel: "Truly, this is the Son of God!"