

## **“An Ironic Death”**

### **Matthew 27**

#### **Good Friday 2009**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good Friday is a day that is full of irony, tragic and yet beautiful irony. We see this even from the name Good Friday itself. On the one hand this is the day when we observe and meditate on the torturous and painful and agonizing sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus. And yet we call this day Good Friday, because we know that it was only through this crucifixion of Christ that we would be delivered from sin and death and hell. This dark, loathsome day is nevertheless truly good because it is the day of our salvation.

The first irony of this day is that an innocent man, Jesus, was condemned to death, while a rebellious murderer, Barabbas, was set free. And all of this was a part of God’s plan. St. Matthew writes:

**“Now it was the governor’s custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’ . . . But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. ‘Which of the two do you want me to release to you?’ asked the governor. ‘Barabbas,’ they answered. ‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?’ Pilate asked. They all answered, ‘Crucify Him!’”**

Brothers and sisters of Christ, you are Barabbas. You are the one who, because you have fallen short of the glory of God, deserve death. But when the question is posed, **“Which of the two do you want me to release?”**, the voice of God answers, **“Barabbas--Dick or David or Mary or Teri.”** **“What shall I do, then, with Jesus?”** **“Crucify Him,”** the Father says. How ironic that we should be released from our sins while Jesus should suffer for them. And yet how thankful we are that God chose to rescue us in that way.

A second irony of Good Friday occurs when the mob chose to take responsibility for Jesus’ death. St. Matthew writes:

**“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’ All the people answered, ‘Let his blood be on us and on our children!’”**

Nowhere do we find the people of Christ’s day giving expression to a more frenzied, fanatical hatred for Jesus than in this particular passage. Faced with a ticklish problem, Pontius Pilate resorts to a time-tested gimmick: passing the buck. Taking water and washing his hands, he insists, **“If there’s any blame in connection with this affair, I’m free of it; you people take it.”** And they did. They were willing to assume all the blame. In fact for all they cared any such consequences extended to succeeding generations of Jews too. That didn’t make any difference.

**“Let His blood be on us and on our children,”** the people screamed. Seldom has hatred been more intense.

Jesus’ enemies intended these words to be a self-imposed curse. **“We accept the consequences of His death.”** But without ever intending it, their words in the light of the Gospel contain a blessing too. For Christ’s blood is on us and our children, in a saving sense. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb was on the doorposts of the houses of the Israelites prior to the exodus, saving the occupants from the plague of death, so also the death-destroying benefits of Christ’s blood are on us and our children through faith. The wonderful blessings of eternal life in heaven and the opportunity for goodness in everyday life which Christ won for us through the shedding of His blood are available to all people of all generations--including those Jews who meant something quite different when they screamed, **“Let His blood be on us and on our children.”** For I Peter 1 says that we were redeemed **“with the precious blood of Christ.”** And Colossians 1 declares that in Christ **“we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.”** Ironically, then, a hysterical, over-enthusiastic mob gave voice to a great Gospel truth. The saving blood of Christ is on us and on our children.

A third irony of Good Friday occurs when Jesus was delivered into the custody of the Roman soldiers. The Passion account states:

**“Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around Him. They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on His head. They put a staff in His right hand and knelt in front of Him and mocked Him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ they said. They spit on Him, and took the staff and struck Him on the head again and again. After they had mocked Him, they took off the robe and put His own clothes on Him. Then they led Him away to crucify Him . . . Above His head they placed the written charge against Him: ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’“**

The soldiers thought that they were just having a little **“fun”** with this convict Jesus--morbid and perverse though it was. Little did they know that when they scornfully hailed Him as the King of the Jews, they were speaking the truth. Little did they know that the One they were spitting on and physically abusing would one day be their judge. And little did they know that the crown of thorns which they hatefully pressed onto His head was actually a fitting symbol of the kind of king He came to be and a means by which He became the Lord of all creation. In Genesis chapter three we read of God’s curse on Adam after he fell into sin: **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you.”** Thorns are part of the curse of sin which we all are under by nature. So when Jesus was crowned with thorns, He was showing that He was a King who came to bear the curse of sin for His subjects and to rule them with His sacrificial love. As Galatians three says, **“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us.”** Jesus’ coronation as King of the Universe took place, then, oddly enough, on the cross. For it was there that He redeemed the Universe, buying it back from the curse, and making it His own. How ironic that the mocking and the thorns and the crucifying, which the soldiers meant to degrade and humiliate Jesus, actually worked to lift Him up and exalt Him as the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

And a fourth irony of Good Friday occurs after Jesus has died. **“Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.”**

This soldier was simply verifying that Jesus was dead. And indeed He was dead. For those who are crucified die by slowly suffocating under the weight of their body which keeps their heart from being able to pump the blood properly. As this occurs, the liquid portion of the blood separates from the red portion. Eventually, oxygen can no longer be carried to all the different parts of the body, and after a great deal of agony and pain, the one crucified dies. What flowed from Jesus' side demonstrated that He had died in this way.

However, there is more here than meets the eye. The church has always interpreted the flow of blood and water to be a picture of the Sacraments, which flow to us from Christ. The water of course is Holy Baptism and the blood, Holy Communion. The forgiveness and the life that we receive in these Sacraments was earned for us and is poured out to us from Christ's holy cross. Just as God created a wife for Adam from Adam's side, so also the heavenly Father has created a holy bride for His Son from His Son's side. For the church is given life and is united with her groom in these Sacraments. Jesus is the new Adam; we are the new Eve. How ironic that something that was meant to verify the death of Christ is actually something which pictures how He gives life to His church.

Dear bride of Christ, as this service continues, as the church grows darker, and as you hear the Passion account for the last time this Lent, consider carefully the ironies and the paradoxes of this Good Friday. Ponder how Jesus died because of you; but also ponder how Jesus died for you. For in such holy meditation on our Lord's Passion, you will find forgiveness and life and peace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.