

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 4th SUNDAY OF LENT (B)

2 Chron 36: 14-17, 19-23 Psalm 137 Ephesians 2: 4-10 John 3: 14-21

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

For some people, a church is a place to escape from the strains and tensions of daily life and the anguish of the wider world. They say that a church is a gathering place – where they can pull themselves together and get some assurance that God is listening and ready to heal and strengthen them. True enough.

But the cross is a reminder that this worship place is not an other-worldly refuge, not an antiseptic room where things are “pure” and where we are in another realm, aloof from human struggle and pain. Instead, amid the lovely paintings and images, the pressed altar linens, special vessels and immaculate-looking host, there is also the symbol of the cross – the cross of pain that ended Christ’s life.

At this worship, in this lovely place, surrounded by stain glass, glowing candles and images of past heroes, our saints, we can sometimes feel the very opposite feelings from those our surroundings suggest. If we are in pain, discouragement, and life is messy, we might feel like aliens, tempted to think that we don’t belong amid the surrounding order – until we look at the cross.

When we make the sign of the cross upon entering and leaving church and at the beginning and end of our service; when we look at the cross that leads the entrance procession in and the procession out at the end of our Mass today, we have a vivid reminder that we don’t have to leave our pain, confusion and missteps – even our sin – at the door. Because of the cross, all parts of our lives are welcome here at worship, especially when there is pain, failure and endings.

The cross anchors us in this place. It assures us that God has not been a cool and distant observer of our lives from someplace on high, but has walked among us and joined us, from the very first breath of air of human life Jesus took in Bethlehem: to being a displaced person with his parents fleeing a hostile and murderous emperor; to living as a stranger in a foreign land; to working at a daily trade and experiencing the routing and boredom of hard work; to village life under an oppressive foreign government; to making and loving friends, enjoying food, drink and table companions; to abandonment by those who swore they would stay by him; to rejection by the religious leaders who should have embraced him;

to being handed over by one of his own to be killed; to being mocked, tortured and put to death.

If we should wonder where God is in the mess of our lives, or if the lovely, neat and orderly service has a place for us when we experience the very opposite feelings, then all we have to do is look upon the cross and know that this is our home. The cross was a cruel instrument of torture and death, meant to intimidate, frighten and keep a people in submission. It was the form of death reserved to slaves and traitors, not used for citizens of the empire.

The cross wasn't just horrible for the victim to endure; it was awful for witnesses to watch. We turn our eyes away from very violent movie or television scenes; imagine the horror of looking on a victim of crucifixion. The cross reminded a captive people that they could be abused and tossed aside as trash if Rome thought they were insubordinate or troublemakers – like Jesus.

Jesus was a threat to the empire because he talked about a kingdom without boundaries, border and guarded borders; where people were equal, not a society where there were a few privileged citizens and the rest underdogs; where people weren't expected to fit in and be like everyone else, but where diversity was valued; where power wasn't the instrument to exert the will of a few, but love and service would be the attraction to membership. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God, but his enemies just heard it as a rival to their own religious and political kingdoms, so they eliminated the competition.

The scriptures tell us that God used power in a different way – to love us and to show us that love by taking on the role of a servant. “For God so loved the world...” that God held nothing back to show us that love, not even the beloved Son. God wanted Jesus' message and example of love to be embraced by all, including the religious and political leaders. But instead, they were threatened by Jesus and that decided to stop him and crush his message.

But rather than back away, Jesus stayed on the message he began, as we see today, early in his ministry, despite the eventual opposition and threats to his life. God so loved us, John tells us, that God let Jesus be scooped up, crushed and put to death. Jesus was so convinced of God's love for us that he went to his death proclaiming that love. Now, anyone looking on the cross would know God's determination to show us how much God loves us. Even from the cross Jesus continued to proclaim

God's love for sinners when he forgave the thief crucified next to him and his executioners.

When the cross was over and Jesus dead, the evil and disruptive forces seemed to have the final victory – as they still seem to do. People's hopes were crushed one more time. It looked like nothing would change the same old dominant forces and patterns of evil. People again seemed caught in a downward spiral, again dragged lower and lower. Then at the very lowest point in their lives – for what could be worse than hopes dashed (?) – with his followers huddled in fear, Jesus appeared, raised from the dead and offered what he promises today: "...that everyone who believes in him [the Son] might not perish but might have eternal life."

We are in the midst of Lent. Through this season of grace, we hear again and again the words Jesus spoke on the first Sunday of Lent, "Repent and believe in the gospel. (Mk 1: 15)" And that is what we are trying our best to do – to turn away from our sin and turn more fully to the grace God is offering us in Christ. Lest we think this work of conversion is ours to do on our own, Paul reminds us today that it is by God's grace we have been saved and are being saved. If we have any doubts about God's intentions and how much God is reaching out to us in love, we have only to look up at the entrance process of today's mass – it is being led by the cross held high.

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God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. (*John 3:15*)

How wonderful that "God gave his only Son". How amazing that we are invited and called not just to love and worship Jesus, but also to imitate him. As Christians, we believe that Jesus, as he lived his life on earth was the most perfect reflection of the love and compassion of God. We believe that we are called to live our own lives in such a way that God's love and compassion are recognized and experienced by those with whom we live and especially by those whom we serve in any way. Lent is a particularly powerful time to focus on the humanity of Jesus and how he lived his life. We need courage and grace to ask if our lives bear any resemblance to his.

"Born in humble circumstances and raised in a pious Jewish household, Jesus was

steeped in the promises of the God of Israel. His intimacy with the God of his ancestors became the ground of his life, his teaching, and his ministry to all whose humanity was in any way diminished. In the power of his words and the inclusivity of his relationships Jesus revealed a God who sides with the poor, chooses the vulnerable, and embraces the stranger. Those who were oppressed encountered in Jesus the Truth that engenders freedom, and they began to live in the power of that Truth. Wherever this occurred, the reign of God became visible, and the reign of human authority, religious and secular, mounted an angry defense. Jesus revealed God's will for humanity in his solidarity with the most vulnerable even when it became clear that this would cost him his life. Those who put faith in the defenseless God of Jesus stand in solidarity with the vulnerable of this world."

"Authentic following of Jesus is an uncomfortable and unpopular affair. Because we are all sinners, none of us who claim to be Christian live this truth perfectly. Humbly acknowledging as much, we are yet bound to proclaim it and hold it as our standard. It is, after all, the standard of Christ."

(The quotations above were taken from the chapter: "Saving the Flesh" by Dominican Sister Kathleen McManus, OP, in the book, Walking with God in a Fragile World 2003)

What can I do?

Pray for the courage and wisdom to imitate Jesus in your life.

Speak up for someone or some group who is "diminished" or "vulnerable".

Join one of Sacred Heart's many ministries of compassion, solidarity and outreach.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

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