

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
Good Friday
April 22, 2011

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Hebrews 10:16-25 John 18:1–19:42

It seems to me that our journey during Holy Week this year has been unusually long. By contrast, the geographic territory and length of time that Jesus covered during the last week of his earthly ministry was fairly brief. Just last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we heard the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. It was a grand parade, complete with adoring crowds. But, it was also a parade with dark overtones: the armies of Rome enter the city by another gate.

We come at last to this day, "Good Friday." On this day we come to the Cross. We have again heard read the Passion Narrative, this time as recounted in the Gospel According to John. There are little differences in the different Gospel accounts of what happened when, who was present, who said what, and the like. In the major points, however, the four Gospels agree, and no more than in the fact that Jesus was indeed nailed to a cross of wood, exposed to the elements of nature and the cruel heckling of the crowd. Crucifixion was a horrible method of execution, one designed to exact the utmost suffering of the criminal, one designed to serve as an example to any person contemplating seditious acts against the Roman state. Crucifixion was designed to get peoples attention. It was a form of domination.

When we walk into this sanctuary, this cross arrests our attention. I think that it is what most visitors notice when they walk through the doors in the rear of this room. In a word, it dominates. This as it should be. The *Collect for Fridays* in Morning Prayer begins, "Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified . . ." There is no resurrection without crucifixion, no Easter without Good Friday; no cross, no crown.

But, we may want to ask some questions. Why do we still make such a big deal out of this? I mean, Jesus was crucified 2,000 years ago; that's ancient history. We do not still crucify people--or do we? (That's not a bad question to ask ourselves from time to time.) Why is this so important that the Church continues with the yearly remembrance of Good Friday, to say nothing of all the mini-remembrances during our weekly celebrations of the Holy Eucharist?

I have a book in my library with the intriguing title, *If God is So Good, Why Do I Hurt So Bad?* It has a subtitle, "For Those Whose Pain is So Great, It Seems the Ache Will Never Go Away." That title and sub-title lead me back again to the cross and its importance to us.

All of us suffer pain, often great, and have aches that seem to remain. Many times, those pains are not just physical; they can just as often be emotional or spiritual. The pains can be individual, familial, or corporate. I am not so sure that one reason why the pain lingers is that we can so easily overlook the events of Holy Week, especially the Cross. Let me hasten to add that I am not saying that we deliberately choose to forget, or that we are bad people if we do. We live in a culture that preaches self-sufficiency and "physician, heal thyself." But that is not how I understand the message of Jesus' death on the Cross.

Jesus sacrifice of himself, freely given according to the Gospel of John, makes a difference because, at that moment, he took upon himself all of the hurt and pain of all of God's creation. Past. Present. Future. Now. Jesus freely accepted all of *our* hurt so that we never have to be alone in our inner agony. Another Collect from Morning Prayer expresses it this way, "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace . . ."

You stretched out your arms of love. The soldiers did not force Jesus' arms into position to have nails driven through them. The crowd, in its bloody frenzy, did not touch Jesus' arms. *Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love,* freely, willingly. You stretched out your arms of love *for us.*

It has been, yet again, another rough week in the news. "If God is so good, why do we hurt so bad?" True enough question, I say. I do not mean to minimize anyone's pain, but I also must ask another question, a question that comes from my relationship with the Jesus of the Cross. "If Jesus had not willingly gone to the Cross, how much greater would our pain have been?"

The Cross is dominant, not just in this sanctuary, but in our relationship with our Lord. It binds us together with him and with believers both within this parish community and in the world. The cross calls us to share our aches and pains—physical, emotional, spiritual—with Jesus and with one another, not just the good times. The cross calls us to share our aches and pains with each other, not just during Holy Week, but throughout all of the year. Jesus is there to help us, to guide us, and to support us.

Let us pray. "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen."