

The Perfect Sacrifice
John 18:28-19:37
Good Friday, April 10, 2009

I.

Today we complete the journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. We began this season of Lent by reaffirming that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. We also confessed a long list of our shortcomings, which included pride, hypocrisy, impatience, and our self-indulgent ways.

That was a sobering experience at the time. Six weeks later we stand before the cross on an even more solemn and mournful occasion.

But now we also recognize the greatest gift God ever gave us, apart from life itself. The dust of our mortality has given way to the sure and certain hope of forgiveness and eternal life. On Ash Wednesday we received crosses of ashes as we acknowledged our sins. Today, through the Christ's blood on the real cross, we know those sins have been washed away.

Christ died for our sins. That's at the core of our faith and is the foundation of all we believe about Christianity. But are there times when we wonder why it happened this way? Do we think of Jesus' suffering and ask if it really was necessary?

II.

Why did Jesus have to die? Wasn't there another way? Why couldn't God just have forgiven everybody? He could have forgiven Adam and Eve. He could have forgiven the disobedient Israelites. He could have forgiven the pagans and their idol worship. And surely he could have forgiven us. After all, we aren't that bad, are we? And he's supposed to love us, isn't he?

Or why couldn't God have treated us like we treat our own children. When our kids do something wrong we discipline them; we say "let that be a lesson to you," and then we go forward without dwelling on it. Couldn't God have done something like that? Couldn't he just have disciplined us and then let us start over with a clean slate?

No, it could not have happened that way. Without Jesus the slate never could be clean. That's because the relationship between God and humanity is very different from the relationships between ourselves and our children.

We usually discipline our children for their own good and so they can learn, just as we learned when we were children. And sometimes the things our kids do might make us remember our own childhoods, and we might even inwardly grin to ourselves even though we are outwardly angry or frustrated with them.

That is not true for God. Unlike us, God is holy and perfect, and cannot relate to our sins. He cannot fondly remember his own youthful mischief because he never did any. God always has been God, and his holiness is completely incompatible with our sinfulness, whether we are children or adults. For God to accept our sin would be to compromise his holiness. He would start to be like us. That's a key theological concept, and it's where Jesus Christ enters the picture.

III.

Let's go back to the question I asked earlier. Why couldn't God just forgive us? If we study God's history with the Hebrew people in the Old Testament we find several situations where God extended forgiveness, or pardon, or withheld his wrath, depending on the translation.

But we also know that God's grace and mercy did not stop the people from returning to their old ways. There's a country western song recorded by Vince Gill, among others, where a fellow asks his angry girl friend to give him just one more last chance.

Well, God at some point must have decided that something had to be done about all these last chances. But there were two serious problems. The first was our inability to do anything to wash away our own sin. Certainly, people could repent, but their sin would remain. We cannot unring the bell, and God could not forever turn a deaf ear.

The second problem was that if God forgave our sins based on nothing more than our repentance, he could just be starting another cycle of sin and repentance similar to his volatile relationship with the Jewish people in the time of the prophets.

So, our sin had to disappear; not just be set aside. Our repentance had to be divinely guaranteed; not just humanly promised. And the sins of future generations had to be absolved in advance. Otherwise, our separation from God would be eternal.

This is where Jesus came in. This is why Jesus was born. And it leads directly to the question of why he had to die. God never intended that Jesus would live to a ripe old age. God did not plan for Jesus to live among us for a while, and then retire to a house along the Sea of Galilee.

No, Jesus' birth solved our dilemma with God. Because Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, born of the Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit, he was able to fulfill both humanity's need for forgiveness and the requirements of God's own righteousness.

Through his humanity he eliminated our sins by absorbing them himself, and through his divinity he forever could be our advocate before God, even to the end of the age.

So, Jesus was the only way. Jesus, the perfectly innocent Lamb, had to assume upon himself all the sins of humanity for then and for all time. Our sins had to become his sins, and he had to stand in our place and take God's wrath for us. He had to suffer the death that rightfully should have been our death. He did this through his humanity.

But, through his divinity our redemption became complete. Because Jesus also was divine, his death created an enduring and perpetual reservoir of reconciliation in which we forever can be cleansed in the eyes of God if we accept Jesus in this way.

As a result, through the death of the perfect Jesus, bearing the sins of imperfect humanity, we are released from the accumulated weight of our transgressions, now and forever. And on that fateful day when we are called to account for the content of our lives, our Lord and Savior will be standing with us.

IV.

So, as we think about Good Friday, we can begin to grasp the full extent of what God our Father did for us through Jesus Christ on the cross. Even though we walked away from God's plans for us and served our own selfish needs, God was willing to allow his Son to redeem us.

And now, for us and for all humanity, Christ's work on the cross has created a new covenant that people didn't have two thousand years ago. Now we can know the truth, and if we believe and have faith we can look forward to the blessings of eternity with God.

I began this homily by talking about the journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. But as we will see in two days, the road goes a little further. It is a journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter, and it takes us straight through the cross. *Amen.*