Good Friday, 2018 - St. Joseph's on Capitol Hill - Fr. Peter Daly's homily

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, Oh, Oh, Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Were you there? Have you been there? Which part has each of us played? Were you the traitorous Judas who betrayed the man he admired and followed?

The impetuous Peter who promised to die for the Lord and then denied he knew him three times before the roster crowed. The manipulative high priest Caiaphas who thought it was better that one man should "die for the people." The cynical Pilate, who didn't believe in the meaning or value of truth, but wanted to defend his own power and position as one of Cesar's servants. The criminal Barabbas, who was truly guilty but got an undeserved and unexpected reprieve because of Jesus. The brutal torturers, who whipped and mocked Jesus and crowned him with thorns. Maybe we were the greedy soldiers, casting lots for his tunic, ready to profit from another man's sorrow. Perhaps too, we have been his grieving mother and the other two Mary's, standing by him in sorrow and shock. Hopefully too, we might have the friends, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, not courageous enough to be public followers but compassionate enough to give Jesus a decent burial. Perhaps too little too late, but none the less a kindness.

Maybe at times in our lives we have played all of these characters, traitorous, unfaithful, selfish, cynical, brutal, greedy, sorrowing, and compassionate. These "types" in the passion are the types in every life and in every age. In a sense, we have all been there when our Lord was crucified. So we should not rush this painful scene. We should not gloss over Good Friday on the way to a more joyous and hopeful Easter Sunday.

We NEED Good Friday to remind us of who we are and what we have done. The secular world does not like Good Friday. There are no "good Friday" cards. No "good Friday" holiday meals. It is too painful, too scandalous, & too horrible. It holds up a mirror of humanity that we would rather not look at. But we must. Why? Because we owe it to ourselves and to all of suffering humanity. We owe it to all the innocent people, the good people, the ordinary people who have suffered unimaginable tragedy and sorrow.

Why Good Friday? Christopher Hitchens, the famous and aggressive atheist thought this day was absurd. He accept the whole idea of the crucifixion and the passion as a sacrifice for others. He did not see how one person could be responsible for others. He thought it was a "cruel God" who would demand payment or satisfaction for sin. Why could God just wipe away our sins he wondered? But what he missed was that Good Friday is necessary. It takes our sin seriously. It also shows that God takes us seriously. It takes our sin seriously by revealing just how damaging it can be. It shows that God takes us seriously by showing how far a loving God would go to lift the burden of evil and to share in our suffering.

Good Friday is the antidote to smile button Christianity. It is the antithesis of the prosperity Gospel, feel good Evangelism that does not take evil, or sin or its effects seriously. But in our Catholic piety, we do take it seriously. We demand that we have a good long, hard, clear eyed, unblinking, unflinching look at evil and our own part in it. Because it leads to each of us playing a part in the evil of the world, even as we all think that it has nothing to do with us.

We Catholics are comfortable with this idea of recognizing our own evil. That is why we have confession and penance and restitution. That is also why we leave the corpus on the cross. Not because we deny the resurrection, but because we take the crucifixion seriously. We realize that there is no path to resurrection that does not go through passion. Without Good Friday, Easter is empty of meaning.

That is why in lent we

- Walk the Via dolorosa, the sorrowful way, in our stations of the cross.
- Cover our heads with ashes on Ash Wednesday
- Join ourselves to Him in our penances and sacrifices in Lent.
- And stand beside Him at the foot of the cross.

Today we take evil and the suffering that results from evil seriously. We recognized that we live in a world where good is not completely eclipsed by our sin, but it comes damn close. We see the crucifixion everywhere.

- In school houses where innocent students and teachers are gunned down.
- At concert halls, discos, and movie theaters where people having innocent fun are killed by mad men in Las Vegas, Orlando, Aurora, Colorado, or Paris.

We see the crucifixion in

- The streets of Damascus, Alepo and Mosul, reduced to rubble by human action.
- In refugee camps everywhere in the world where innocent people have to flee for their lives. (See Ai Wei Wei's film "Human Flow". 65 million world-wide.
- On islands in Greece and beaches in Turkey, Italy, and Libya, where the bodies of the poor and desperate wash up on the beaches with the tide.

We see Christ crucified in

- Women who are victims of violence and the sex trade.
- In babies killed in the womb
- In children forced into prostitution and slavery or fleeing gang violence in Central America.
- In torture and killing inflicted by governments all around the world.
- In governments who kill their own people and in rulers who steal the wealth of their nations and squander it on themselves.
- It continues in dictators not unlike Cesar and Pilate, who cling to office by any means necessary.
- And this week, 50 years ago, we saw Christ crucified again in the assassination of Martin Luther King and the rioting that followed. The wounds of the sin of racism still have not healed.

The crucifixion is not just a one-time event in distant past. It is an everyday occurrence. It is an on-going tragedy. It is real life.

We are not bi-standers, but participants in this on-going tragedy. We each have played a part. Especially here in the capital of the most powerful empire on earth today. Especially here on Capitol Hill where decisions are made or not made which affect the lives of millions for good or evil. But as bleak as Good Friday may be it is not a cause for despair. It is a cause for reflection, sorrow and self-examination ---- but not despair. We believe that God can bring grace out of even the greatest evil. We believe that evil of the cross is the sign of our salvation. But first we take evil seriously. It is not a figment of our imagination. Sin is not something amusing or trivial or childish.

We recognize that we have a choice to make when confronted with evil.

Evil can make us bitter or better.
Evil can move us to cynicism or to compassion.
It can make us hard hearted or empathetic.
It can make us hate or can call us to love.

If we look out on the world with the eyes of Christ, we do not gloss over its evil but we see humanity with eyes of compassion. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." We see a world that can be redeemed by love. It might be too much for us, but not for God. Christians take suffering and evil seriously. But we also take God seriously. We see in suffering, an opportunity for grace to bring its healing. For where sin abounds, grace abounds even more.

We believe that even from the most horrific evils, like wars and slavery can give birth to some good. This is the meaning of what John says in the gospel when he recounts that blood and water flowed from the side of Jesus. These two fluids are the signs and symbols of life, blood and water. From the side of the dying Christ flowed blood and water that give life to the whole Church, indeed life to the whole world. We are not alone in seeing that suffering can be redemptive. It is part of the human understanding to see that evil can sometimes call forth the best in us.

So long as human beings respond to each other with compassion and love, the evil of the world can be overcome. It is part of the gift of the Jews to humanity, that our savior, deeply rooted in that Jewish spirituality, believed that humanity could Passover from death to life, evil to good. Jesus is our Passover and our lasting peace. Among the last lines that Anne Frank

penned in her diary before she was taken to her death was the bold statement, “In spite of everything, I continue to believe that people are good.” When the allied troops searched the dead body of a child after the liberation of the concentration camp at Ravensbruck, they found a note in the child’s pocket. It was a sort of prayer probably written by some adult in the camp and given to the child to keep. It read*: "O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering that they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have borne, thanks to this suffering --- our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness."*

That is kind of spirit that can simultaneously take seriously all the evil of the world and still believe in the triumph of goodness. That is the spirit Christ, the suffering servant, who hung upon the cross because of our sins and brought good from pure evil.

Behold the wood of the cross, on which has hung the salvation of the world.

Come, let us worship.