

**Good Friday**  
Homily of April 14, 2006  
by Fr. Brian Joyce

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I have two questions about Good Friday. One is “Why did Jesus have to suffer so much?” And the other is, “In the history of the world, what difference did it make?” Now, I have the Baltimore Catechism which some of you remember. And it has this answer. It says it was all because of redemption. “By redemption is meant that Jesus Christ as the redeemer of the whole human race, offered his suffering and death to God as fitting sacrifice and satisfaction for our sins, and regained for us the right to be children of God and heirs of heaven.” And I remember that answer, and it is all well and good but it does not answer my questions.

My questions are “Why did he have to suffer so much and what difference has it made in the history of the world?” They use the word “redemption” and the word “salvation.” When I hear the word “salvation” all kind of images come to mind, about life after death and the gates of heaven and freedom from original sin and everlasting life and more. Now, you can get a much bigger and thicker catechism if you want today. There is the new Catholic Catechism, ten times larger than this and deeper and pretty complete. And nowhere, at any point, does it define what salvation is. What is this salvation? It says God alone brings salvation. It says salvation is a gift. It says Jesus is the source of salvation. It says God has been working at our salvation from the beginning of the world. Good stuff.... But what does “salvation” mean? When I think of salvation, redemption, I think of another word, a Jewish word, “Shalom,” that wholeness and peace that I think we are called to from the beginning. Or sometimes it’s called “atonement” or spelled out better, “at-one-ment.” That’s what salvation is about, being at one with ourselves, with creation, the world around us, and with our God.

But, why did he have to suffer so much to get us at-one-ment? When Mel Gibson’s movie came out, “The Passion of the Christ,” Bruce Smith, who is the pastor down at Resurrection said to me, “Was so much blood necessary? How much blood does it take?” Atonement is not about placating a God who is angry and upset with us because the Scripture tells us from the beginning our God is the one saving us. Our God is not angry, but he is at work bringing us together in wholeness, in at-one-ment. So, if pain and blood is not the issue, what was the issue? Here’s my answer. I just offer it if it might help to fit you. It fits me.

The destiny of our world in God’s wisdom and love and plan is all about peace, shalom, at-one-ment with ourselves and our God and creation. And there seem to be two ways of getting there. One way seems to be by competition, by victory, by power, by troops, by weapons of mass destruction. The Romans achieved what they call “peace.” It was called the “Pax Romano.”

Seneca wrote about it later. He said, “The Romans make the world a desert and they call it peace.” Hiroshima brought peace. That is one way to get peace. Another way to get peace is by justice and non-violence. One way is the way of the fist and one way is the way of the open hand. Christ’s way was of the open hand, an ethic of the heart, being poor in spirit, an ethic that called for radical equality, for equality among all people, even and especially those we don’t like very much, an ethic that called for compassion and for forgiveness.

Now, here’s the problem. That path, shalom, to peace to at-one-ment, is on a collision course with the other path. When we see the cross, I always remember being told “Remember it’s the cross like reaching up to God, a vertical spire to God, and also reaching across to each other.” And that’s a good reminder. But it’s also a reminder that, if we follow the path of Jesus, it leads to the cross. It’s at cross purposes, and that is why the suffering of Jesus, the blood and pain, was not the issue. But it was clearly the foreseeable result and probably still is today. People like Gandhi, people like Martin Luther King, they are on that path.

And what difference did it make in the world? I’ll tell you what I think about that. We do not live in a created universe. For me, a created universe means there is a God outside it that started it and walked away and is watching from a distance like a spectator. We live in an emerging universe. From the very beginning, our God is at the heart of our world. In a profound sense, the reign of God unfolds as a holy web of relationships that bind us to each other and bind us to our creator. And Christ makes all the difference, all the difference. We just see hints of it. We look around at the history of our world. We see hermits and monks dedicating their lives to say “It’s not business as usual if you follow Jesus,” that religion is not just a social declaration. But they remind us that it calls for more than that. We look and see a history of hospitals and orphanages and people giving up their lives to help those in the midst of plagues. We see a history of education of the poor, of universities, of missionaries, not to convert people but to serve them. We see a history of abolition, of civil rights, of pacifism, of just war, of welcoming the immigrant, a world as a place of continuing divine action from inside. And the boundaries between life and death, after the cross of Jesus, are much thinner than we had imagined. The dead are no longer lost forever. The dying are no longer strangers. And reverence for the human person and the human body.....

I think this all comes and begins with the cross of Jesus. Now, you may say there is a lot that went the opposite and still does. Sure. But, you know, our emerging universe is fifteen billion years old. Our human race just began a few seconds ago. We are late-comers. And the cross of Jesus says not really that it is finished, but it has only just begun. And we are here to call this “Good Friday” because it has begun the work of our God. Amen.