

Good Friday
April 10, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We're told this Holy Week will be the single deadliest week of this pandemic for us Americans. I do not believe in Manifest Destiny (the idea that America is God's country) and neither should you, but the very image of our country looking for escape from so much death and anguish on the very day that we hear of the Christ winning the victory through suffering ... it would almost seem as if it were preordained.

Now, some would hear this and say, "Oh, you radical, zealous Christians!... taking delight in this situation and the idea of divine punishment!"

Well, first of all, no one delights in this situation; do we not pray daily that this scourge would be removed from us? But, secondly, whatever divine *temporal punishment* this is upon the world, it certainly pales in comparison to what divine *eternal condemnation* would be! (Remember from Bible Study, there's a big difference between *krima* – *judgment*, and *katakrima* – the great judgment). And *that* perhaps leads to a deeper appreciation for one of the "silver linings" in having to observe Good Friday as we do this night: Sometimes, it seems that it's only when we see our futility in the face of *temporal* enemies and *temporal* divine discipline that we

have a better grasp of how much more Jesus endured for our sake and how much more that *eternal* punishment must be from which he has saved us.

Consider the verse in the Good Friday hymn which says, “Ye who think of sin but lightly Nor suppose the evil great *Here* may view its nature rightly, *Here* the guilt may estimate.” If you want to view the nature of sin, going into the hospitals of New York – as tragic and heartbreaking and dire as the scenes have been – they wouldn’t hold a candle to the great evil of sin’s eternal plague upon sinners. How much solemnity arises, how much urgency to confess our sins, when we begin to realize that the tragedy we behold is only because of a mere consequence of sin and leaves “untouched, uncured, unabated” sin itself.

Yes, what an “opportunity” (though I hate using that word in these difficult times) to reflect on the importance of having Christ crucified always before us!

Not in that we should see Jesus as our example! Isn’t that how many will teach it this evening, “Let us be bold in death, like Jesus was bold on his way to the cross!” No, Jesus did not go to the cross to merely give us an example for Christian death. Rather, what comfort belongs to us Christians this evening – even in the face of what could be (if the projections are right) the deadliest week our homeland and American soil has known since the Spanish flu – what comfort for us Christians that we can say that our death is not our

penalty or punishment (our *katakrima*), for Christ has suffered the great *katakrima* in our place. God is not forsaking His Church as she dwells in this land, but rather – whether it be this situation or some other that suddenly befalls us – we may suffer and even die with *confidence*... for our death is already as good as undone, our salvation from eternal enemies is already certain, and only the temporal trials of life in this fallen world remain.

But, we can only be comforted in this truth if we rightly understand the Law and Gospel of this Good Friday. It used to be that folks overly-emphasized the wrath and anger of God Most High on this solemn night, so that the crucifixion of Jesus was seen only as Law, and the proclamations of “Christ is risen” was seen as the Gospel. That can lead to a despising of the cross, something that we need to rush past as quickly as we can, speeding on to the empty tomb and “leaving behind” the suffering of our Lord and dropping the description of “Crucified” from the title “Christ.” Those who would make this mistake must wrestle with Paul saying thirty years after the resurrection, “I desired to know nothing among you but Christ and him crucified.”

Indeed, there’s much Gospel – in truth, the heart of the Gospel – in the meditation on Jesus, crucified as our spotless substitutionary Lamb. Gospel in terms of Jesus’ atoning work for us, but also in terms of God’s love for us. You know the passages that equate Jesus’ death with God’s love: “God in this way loved the

world, that He gave His only begotten Son.” And again, “God shows us his love in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” And again, “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him.” And *again*, “This is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and gave His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

And yet, as people have embraced the love of God in the work of the Christ and learned to rejoice that this Friday is *Good*, some have made the mistake of “falling off the other side of the horse” and arguing that, because the death of Christ is motivated by God’s love, we therefore cannot speak of the wrath and anger of God on this Good Friday. But Jesus wasn’t over-reacting in asking “My, My God, why have you forsaken me?” The only way for us to be spared is for Jesus not to be spared. Nothing else would or could spare you... no suffering of financial loss, no isolation from family and friends, no enduring of illness or fear of it, no amount of prayer induced by life’s trials, no abundance of donations of masks or risking of life for the sake of another’s... all these noble things, all these genuine sufferings, they all only bear the weight of the *consequence of sin, consequence of the Fall*... they do not deal with the cause of the Fall, the cause of sin. The reality of “original sin” is so deeply woven into our lives that we don’t even notice it... so how can we defend ourselves from it? And how we can isolate ourselves

from that which is inherently engrained in us from conception? No amount of sheltering-in-place would allow us to outlast the weight of our sin.

No, this Good Friday is a solemn day because God's love is in balance with God's wrath and judgment over our sin. After all, isn't that beautiful John 3:16 passage we know and love followed by a reminder that those who do not believe in Christ taking their place "are condemned already." Are we not reminded by other passages that God gave His Son to "prove Himself to be just" because He had passed over former sins?, which a just God cannot do without finally applying *katakrima* and proving himself to be just! And again, don't the Scriptures specifically say that the sins of His people *kindled his anger* and that the death of Christ "saved us from His wrath"?

So, we must acknowledge both the wrath of God toward sin and the love of God for the sinner. And again, the love of a Father toward his obedient Son, and yet the willingness of the Father to forsake the sin-bearer, to "receive him back again" (if you will) as the sin is atoned for, to say, "Yes, My Son, You *have* done my will... I agree with you, "It is finished."), so that Jesus might – as a trusting Son – call out to his loving Father, "Father, into your hands..."

But, opposed to those who want to view this only through the lens of the Father's love, such is not merely a love story between the Father and His Son. It is the dealing with sin, the meritorious sacrifice for you, the paschal Lamb perfectly offered... so that the

Father is pleased not only with His Son, but also with those the Son has redeemed and claimed as His own through holy Baptismal waters. Yes, we can be sure of not just the Son's love toward us, but the Father's, who sees us robed in Christ's righteousness, no longer children of darkness, but now children of His marvelous light. In fact, because it bestows upon us the fruits of Christ's cross, St Paul – when speak of *Baptism* – St. Paul speaks both of the Father's love toward you and of the language of *salvation*: “God, ...because of the great love with which He loved us, *saved us* through the washing of regeneration.” Yes, on this solemn Good Friday, we may think on all the fruits of Christ's cross applied to us, make the sign of Jesus' cross as it covers us, and say, “I am baptized into Christ.”

Do we not have the hints of baptism even as we specifically confess the person and work of Jesus? This week's Catechism memorization, teaching us to meditate upon the Second Article of the Creed, confesses thus about Jesus: “who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me, not with gold and silver, but with his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death.” And he's done it to give me a promise: “That I may be his own.” There's your baptismal identity directly resulting from and woven into his death! And, as His own, you have every comfort and confidence that He will see you through this troubled world into the life of the world to come.

Such is not only an eternal comfort, but a temporal one! And that is so important in these dark days. How often do the enemies or doubters of the gospel snap, “So what that Jesus died for sins. What good does that do us now, in this midst of this pandemic and financial loss and temporal suffering and tragic death. What good is baptism, what good is the message of Christ’s cross in this hour?!” Well, it is every good! ... for it is the greatest, most marvelous comfort in all the world because it promises me that God does not forsake me, but will carry me through every earthly trial unto the redemption of our bodies on the great last day. Notice, the promise is not preservation from earthly suffering (how the media loves to highlight and ridicule some charismatic Christian who thinks that the blood of Jesus will keep them from contracting coronavirus!)... but the promise of the cross is not freedom from earthly suffering; rather, the promise is God’s love for us and gracious presence with us in suffering because of the guarantee that we will still be His on the other side of death and into eternal life. Indeed, consider the great Good Friday hymns that the Church has sung for hundreds of years, during times of joy and times of sorrow, and how such Good Friday hymns look at the cross and the certainty of our salvation not as a way to ensure we won’t see death, but as a pillar of steadfastness that teaches us how to – and gives us boldness to – face death.

For example, the beloved Good Friday hymn, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” focuses not just on Jesus’ death, but also on the prospects of our own, that we are safe to die *in* him rather than live *apart from* him. The hymn says, “Lord, let me never, never, outlive my love for Thee.” But, the hymn’s longer version says it this way:

“My Savior, be Thou near me when death is at my door;
Then let Thy presence cheer me,
Forsake me nevermore!
When soul and body languish,
O leave me not alone,
But take away mine anguish by virtue of Thine own!

And, the following verse understands how Jesus’ death is the certainty and comfort you need in the time of your own:

Be Though my consolation, My shield, when I must die;
Remind me of Thy passion when my last hour draws nigh.
Mine eyes shall then behold Thee, Upon Thy cross shall dwell,
My heart by faith enfold Thee. Who dieth thus dies well.

Yes, dear friends, whenever our last earthly hour comes, may we take comfort in this Good Friday, and God grant us remembrance to pray, “Hold thou Thy cross before my closing eyes...”

So tonight, for those who are dying and have the privilege of dying on a Friday that is truly Good, the hymn confesses it well when it points us to Jesus’ death in our stead: “Here we have a firm foundation, here the refuge of the lost.” Indeed, when we have been

brought to our knees by the consequences of sin, and we realize we are the sick who need the physician, the lost who need to be saved, we still have a refuge, a firm foundation:

“Christ, the Rock of our salvation, Is the name of which we boast; Lamb of God, for sinners wounded, Sacrifice to cancel guilt! None shall ever be confounded who on Him their hope have built.”

So then, friends, on this Good Friday – unlike any other we have ever known in our lifetimes (and, Lord willing, unlike any we will ever know again in our earthly sojourn) – on this Good Friday, learn how to bear with suffering, learn how to die. Not with Jesus as your example, but with Jesus as your redeemer, as your certainty of salvation and life beyond the grave. For, once in history, the Father who loves you sent His Messiah to the cross to bear all the wrath that was due you, and that Christ went willingly to atone for you, and now lives to intercede for you... that you may build on this firm foundation and live, and die, that *in Him* you shall never be confounded.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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