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Preaching the Cross of Christ During Lent

There is an important parallel in the way the passion of Christ is presented in the liturgical calendar and in the New Testament. This is not just an interesting coincidence. The content and inner dynamic of the worship celebrations of the Christian Church should be a conscious extension of the faith posture of the apostolic era, continuously flowing, as from a living fountain, through the inspired pages of the Scriptures. The way this is incorporated into the rituals of the lenten season, especially in the climax of the sacred Triduum, is a fitting topic for our preaching at this time of the year. This is part of the rich heritage that the people of God deserve to learn more deeply as a source of spiritual nourishment.

Scholars who have tried to trace the way the memories of the earliest Christian eyewitnesses were passed on to posterity have long shared a consensus that the accounts of the suffering and death of the Son of Man constitute the oldest literary element in all four gospels. There is no section in these canonical records of the words and deeds of the master that has more striking similarities among the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel than the narratives of what happened between the Last Supper and Jesus' death and burial. This careful and unified preservation is a reflection of the conviction that what seemed to outsiders to be an ignominious defeat was actually a precious treasure.

The other books of the New Testament place a comparable emphasis on the events involved in the crucifixion, not by recounting the historical details in chronological sequence the way the evangelists do, but by focusing on the undeniable truth of Jesus' passion and its profound theological significance. In the Acts of the Apostles this comes out in the way the preaching of Peter and Paul highlights the assassination of the Messiah. By underscoring his role as the sacrificial Lamb, the letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation keep the reader's attention focused on the suffering Jesus endured. The Pauline correspondence and the Catholic epistles return repeatedly to reflections on

the passion of Christ in order to point out what his pain and patience have won for us in our struggle against sin and guilt, and in our striving for holiness.

Christian art and popular devotion have joined with Scripture and liturgy in making the graphic depiction of the crucified Christ one of the most well-known religious images in Western culture. Yet our familiarity with this picture can be misleading if we fail to realize how exceptional this tradition of remembrance is. The care with which Jesus' followers handed on the details of his trials, torture, and public execution might be considered a natural reaction in the time period immediately after they took place. However, our constant rehearsal of this mystery through the ages is unusual and actually countercultural when we compare it to what happens in the case of others who have been martyred at the hands of the unjust. After an initial intense interest in the tragic circumstances surrounding their heroic end, there tends to be a steady abbreviation of the story as years pass by. Perhaps this is a natural reaction, a shying away from the pain of rethinking the unchangeable past.

For most of us, the only death we ever revisit in this fashion is that of Jesus, as it is memorialized in the Scriptures. The Catholic community around the world gathers to do this, not out of a desire for self-punishment, as though reopening our sorrow were an end in itself, nor, much less, because of some spirituality based on distorted satisfaction sought in reflecting on the suffering of another. What draws us back to contemplate the events of the paschal sacrifice is contained in the revelation of Jesus himself: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (John 12:32-33). Although the wisdom of the world labels such an enterprise "unhealthy" or "foolishness," an inner movement of the Spirit leads the followers of Christ to find in their meditation on the passion a healing beyond human words, an experience of the saving power of God (1 Cor 1:17-18, 23).

The time when Catholics enter this mystical encounter most publicly and self-reflectively as a visible worshiping community is during the liturgical and paraliturgical gatherings of the lenten season. In its post-Vatican II Lectionary for Mass, the Latin Church has only two extended readings each year of the events immediately surrounding the crucifixion: one on Passion Sunday and one during the Easter Triduum. Many adults remember listening to the passion accounts from all four gospels during the

course of Holy Week in times gone by. The present arrangement calls for the use of John 18–19 every year during the “Celebration of the Passion” on Good Friday, and the reading of only one of the Synoptic narratives, in connection with the celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In 1997 we will use Mark 14–15.

In the officially printed lectionaries used in the United States, the “long form” of these passion accounts runs six or seven columns in length, approximately five or six times the size of the gospel pericope on a typical Sunday throughout the year. To the disappointment of many eager participants, it is not uncommon for presiders to omit the homily on these occasions. Some have cited as their reason the weariness of the faithful or the complicated nature of the passages, insisting that adequate explanation and exhortation are provided in the celebration of the rest of the ritual.

Of course one needs to be sensitive to particular pastoral needs, but these should be weighed in consideration of the rare possibility the homilist has on these two occasions to offer reflections that complement this unique and solemn proclamation of the word. If we can take advantage of these special liturgical situations, they offer an unmatched setting in which to explain how central these accounts are to our observance of the paschal mystery. In doing this effectively we can help our people with catechesis and the enthusiasm of our own faith to look at the special slant each evangelist brings to the climactic story of what Jesus was willing to suffer for our sakes. The goal of this preaching must be not only to enhance the community’s spiritual penetration into what has just been made present through the inspired text, but to plant seeds that can bear fruit when individuals take up these accounts in the privacy of their own prayer life.

In order to elicit a greater level of participation on the part of the laity, it is customary in many parishes to distribute printed texts of the passion narratives so that all can join in with the “populus” or other parts. Being careful not to slip from the prayerful atmosphere of the liturgy into an excessively pedantic mood, the homilist might use this as a golden chance to point out how and where Old Testament quotations are used to connect what happened at Calvary with the broader lines of salvation history.

The lenten period, traditionally understood as a special time for reflection on Jesus’ passion and death, is followed by the Easter-

tide celebration of his resurrection. There is a sense that these paired seasons should symbolize the balance in St. Paul's eloquent juxtaposition of the elements of the paschal mystery: "We believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom 4:24-25). In reviewing the choices made in the lectionary some have regretted the fact that it does not provide more exposure for selections from the passion narratives. After all, they argue, we manage to find a place at Mass for reading all that the evangelists report about the post-resurrection appearances. Proposals have been made to subdivide the texts of one of the passion narratives into pericopes that might be distributed over a longer time period. This would allow for a more measured reflection on the individual scenes, which some fear get lost in the lengthy, unbroken flow of the present liturgical presentation.

Whatever the merits of such critique, one should keep in mind that there are already two other avenues in place with which the preacher may and should approach the mystery of the Cross. On the one hand, as paragraph 12 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminded us, the prayer life of the Church should not be restricted to its specifically liturgical celebrations. Other forms include paraliturgical services such as *Tenebrae*, the Stations of the Cross, processions focusing on artistic representations of Jesus in his suffering, sermons, Bible study sessions, and the recitation of the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. All these practices and other devotional expressions that have been generated by the popular faith of the people are not only alternative ways of looking at the suffering and death of the Lord; they can also serve to prepare us to hear more perceptively and enter more deeply into the liturgical proclamations of the passion narratives.

A second element to keep in mind in any comprehensive consideration of our lenten use of the Scriptures is suggested by the different ways the New Testament approaches the topic of the paschal sacrifice in other passages read during the days and weeks leading up to Holy Week. Granted the obvious enrichment to be gained from meditating on the final mortal hours of Jesus at the climax of each of the Gospels, it is also important to remember that these accounts focus predominantly on the physical side of the passion. Aside from what is implied through the brief responses and prayers spoken by the unjustly condemned Protagonist, they betray relatively little about his inner psychological

state. Even less is expressed in any explicit way in these narratives about the theological significance of what Jesus endured for those who believe in him.

Here are some further texts that also appear in the lenten lectionary and which might be used in 1997 as occasions for looking more closely at other aspects of the mystery of the Cross:

Matt 20:17-18: The third of the Matthean passion predictions, coupled with the episode of the Zebedees' mother (no. 233, Wednesday of the second week of Lent).

1 Cor 1:22-25: We preach a crucified Christ, challenge to outsiders, but to us, the power and wisdom of God (no. 29, third Sunday of Lent B).

John 3:14-21: The comparison between the bronze serpent erected by Moses and the life-giving image of Christ "lifted up" (no. 32, fourth Sunday of Lent B).

Heb 5:7-9: Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered to become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (no. 35, fifth Sunday of Lent B).

Phil 2:6-11: What Jesus did for us is a model of humility and service for us and the motive for his exaltation by the Father (no. 38, Passion Sunday).

An important task for the lenten preacher is the communication of the twofold truth that must be understood and owned by anyone aspiring for maturity in faith. On the one hand, all of us are sinners and it is our disobedience that made it necessary for Jesus to suffer. On the other, the pain he willed to undergo on our behalf has become, in the mysterious plan of the Father, the means of our liberation from the destructive power of sin. By his stripes we are healed (1 Pet 2:24).

In the post-resurrection appearances recounted in John and Luke there is a detail mentioned that must be considered somewhat paradoxical. By this point Jesus had not simply been revived but transformed. One might have expected his resurrected body to appear completely changed and noticeably free from any defect. Yet he calls attention to the enduring marks of the wounds in his hands and feet and side (Luke 24:39; John 21:27). For those called to an ever deeper understanding of what the passion means, what was once considered ignominy, woundedness, and imperfection can now be seen as a badge of courage and love.

Hopefully our homiletic dialogue with the way Jesus' redemptive suffering is presented in the Scriptures will help to accomplish what the Catholic community requests in prayer on Good Friday: "Lord, send down your abundant blessing upon your people who devoutly recall the death of your Son in the sure hope of the resurrection. Grant them pardon; bring them comfort. May their faith grow stronger and their eternal salvation be assured."

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