

GOOD FRIDAY HOMILY-APRIL 2, 2021

**READINGS: Isaiah 52:13-53: 12;
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 31;
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-7;
Gospel of John 18:1-19:42**

Embracing the cross for spiritual growth and life.

Yesterday evening, we celebrated the Mass of the Lord's Supper-- the last meal Jesus had with his disciples. At this meal Jesus instituted the Eucharist. This celebration brings us to the celebration of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every culture has a set of beliefs, attitudes and customs toward death, grieving practices and funeral ceremonies. In Ghana, the Ashanti people traditionally consider the one-year anniversary of the death of a loved one a very important day. At dawn, the relatives and friends of the deceased assemble in the house of the family of the deceased. They perform the traditional rites of grieving. At this celebration, the will of the deceased is made public to the family members. The family would then make a visit to the cemetery to see the erected tombstone for the first time. According to the custom of the Ashanti people, the celebration of the one-year anniversary of death brings the grieving process to an end. The one-year anniversary also brings together family members to remember and celebrate the life of the deceased for the last time.

Today is Good Friday. Today we have gathered together to remember the day that our Lord Jesus Christ died on a cross. Today, in the spirit of austerity, humility and penance, we have come to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' death to us who believe in him. We notice that the atmosphere in our church is entirely different from any other day. With an open tabernacle and a bare altar, there is a feeling of absence of light and life in the church. Today's celebration consists of three parts: the liturgy of the word, the adoration of the Holy Cross and distribution of Holy Communion.

We begin our reflection with the Gospel reading-- the Passion narrative of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John. The Passion narrative is reported in the four Gospels. Last Sunday, we read the narrative from Mark, the Gospel for Year B of the liturgical calendar. However, each Evangelist has used their own unique style of writing the Passion narrative to explain their theology of Jesus-his identity and his mission. Today's reading describes the betrayal and denial by Jesus' followers, the condemnation by the authorities, the humiliation and the suffering that Jesus experienced before his death. The Evangelist points to the fact that the death of Jesus on the cross was entirely different from any other death. The Passion narrative tells us that Jesus is the king whose kingship shines through all his humiliation and suffering. According to the Evangelist, Jesus' Passion and death occurred for a purpose, "so that the Scripture might be fulfilled".

The Passion narrative leads us to the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Suffering is also a theme in this passage. The passage describes an unnamed servant of God who suffered injustice, was despised and rejected by the people. Although he was righteous, the servant was made to suffer. He was like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.

Yet, he did not open his mouth. We hear in the first reading, “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” The description of the events in the life of the unnamed suffering servant in the first reading foreshadows what Jesus went through as reported in the Gospel. We can therefore connect the unnamed suffering servant in the first reading to be Jesus in the Gospel.

The suffering of Jesus as a servant is what the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews talks about. The writer of the Letter describes Jesus as the great high priest who though the Son of God learned obedience through what he suffered. The writer taught the early Christians that by his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus has become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

What do the three readings tell us about Good Friday? The readings tell us that Jesus suffered and died on the cross for our sake. The main focus for today’s celebration is the cross. From today’s readings, the cross is associated with the suffering and the death of Jesus. On Good Friday as part of our commemoration of Jesus’ death on the cross, traditionally we have individual veneration of the cross. We are given the opportunity to adore or venerate the cross either by genuflecting or making a sign of reverence in front of the cross. This year, due to the pandemic, the individual adoration is omitted. However, even though there is no individual adoration of the cross, today’s celebration invites us to reflect on the spiritual significance of the meaning of the cross in our lives. The readings today tell us that Jesus endured suffering for our sake. Our Scriptures also tell us that by his own blood Jesus brought people of every tribe, tongue and nation back to God. Jesus died for us because of his great love for us.

Today is the time of discernment-- to recognize the spiritual significance of carrying our own crosses. The pandemic has been challenging for us. It has affected our health, our work; it has affected the way we worship God in our churches; it has affected our social lives and our relationships with others. The pandemic has changed the way we live. We may be experiencing pain, difficulties, struggles and suffering. Perhaps today, we need to reflect and ask God to grant us a spirit of courage and strength to continue to endure this pandemic with patience. According to today’s second reading, we have hope. The hope is that Jesus sympathizes with us in our suffering because he was also tested as we are.

Today is also the time we need to ask God to awaken in our hearts our response to live our lives modeling the suffering of Jesus (1 Peter 2). We take up our cross through our actions based on our faith—a faith that is revealed in our love of God and neighbour. We embrace the cross as Christians when we strive to make sacrifices of love and charity for the sake of others. Our offering of ourselves for the sake of others expresses our gratitude to God. Remembering the death of Jesus is a time for us to remember our brothers and sisters who have died. In a special way we remember those who have died from COVID-19 during the pandemic. Good Friday’s celebration offers us hope. The cross, “the power of God”, (1 Corinthians 1) holds out this promise of hope to our deceased brothers and sisters. In the document, The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council,

Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope), the Church teaches that “our victory over death has been gained for us by the risen Christ, who by his own death has freed us from death” (22).

Our Lenten journey is towards the joy of Easter. Our Lenten journey to Good Friday will not be complete without the Easter joy. It is from the desolation of today that we look toward the Resurrection event in which the cross offers us hope, instead of despair; courage instead of fear; strength instead of weakness, and the promise of a new life in the Spirit of God.

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