

FEAST OF THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS

Fr. Bob Bedard – September 14, 1986 – St. Mary's Church

Feast of the Triumph of the Cross – Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 78, Phil 2:6-11, John 3:13-17

The Cross speaks to me of God's intense desire to love us, to have us know that we're loved, and to receive our love in return, His passionate need, almost, to bring us into His family. He's got a place for us, each one of us. He loves us so incredibly and so tenderly that He's got a place for us all marked out in His house forever. And He wants us to claim that now, and to begin to live it as fully, as He will make it possible for us to do, as we open our lives to Him.

You see, we are so totally unworthy, we in no way could earn eternal life with God. We couldn't earn it, we have to be given it by God. It could have been given by Him in many different ways, but He chose to do it, as St. John quotes Jesus as saying, "God so loved the world that He sent His only Son." I don't know what it cost the Father and the Son to be separated like that. I don't.

I find it very difficult to talk about the Cross. What they did to Jesus was so monstrous, that I really, very honestly and personally tell you I would rather not think about it. I have difficulty getting into it, because it's so bad. I feel like Peter on the way to Jerusalem. You know that day when they were heading up to Jerusalem, and Jesus said, "The Son of Man is going to be persecuted. He's going to be harassed. He's going to be arrested. He's going to be crucified." And Peter said, "No! No, no, that can't happen to you. We won't let it!" I feel like Peter. I feel like saying, "Lord, don't do that. Don't suffer. Don't die. Do it some other way." It is too heavy, Lord. I can't grasp it. I can't understand it.

When I sat the other day... Friday morning is my time to sit before the Lord and say, "Lord, what have you got to say this weekend?" Because, you know, if He doesn't have something to say this weekend, I don't have anything to say either. I haven't got a thing. Oh sure, I could get up and talk. I could, as my homiletics professor in the seminary said, I could get up and "boot the ball around." I could do that anytime. I taught school for 19 years, I know what it is to just get up and talk, with all due respect to the teachers that are here. But if the Lord doesn't give me something to say, I don't have anything to say. So every morning I sit there with a kind of trepidation and say, "Lord, if you have something to say, if you do, then I need to hear it now."

And, I have always had difficulty in talking about the Cross, about the sufferings of Jesus. I've heard others do it. I don't even like to listen to it! So I said, "Lord, what is it? What should I say?" And after sitting there for a few minutes and getting absolutely nowhere - no inspiration whatever - the thought came into my mind (I have to presume it's from the Lord), saying something like, "Tell them about your experience of a few years ago." I hadn't thought of it for a while. And I said, "Really? Tell them that? Alright then, I will."

It was back in 1979. That's a little over 7 years ago. It was Good Friday. The liturgy was scheduled for 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and I felt that I should pray a bit before that. And I went into a little chapel where I lived and sat on the floor in front of the Blessed Sacrament, in front of the tabernacle. And I just sat there. My mind is continually boggled by the Cross, you see. And I found myself asking the question, "What was it like? What would it have been like to actually be

there?” And as I closed my eyes, I felt as though I was being transported into the whole scene myself. It wasn't a vision. A vision is something that you see with your eyes open. My eyes were closed. It was played out in my mind's eye, but it was very vivid. And it went on, if you can believe it, for over an hour. And the whole thing was the scene in Jerusalem on Good Friday, and I was there. I was in it.

The story was something like this: I was young: 20 years of age. I had come from northern Europe. I had left home in a spirit of adventure when I was 20, perhaps to make my fortune – there wasn't much going on there. I had Gallic and Gaelic roots, as I do. And I thought perhaps if I go around the Mediterranean ports towards some of those richer places, I'd strike it rich somehow. And through whatever kind of happenstance, I wound up in Palestine, at the far eastern end of the Mediterranean, living among those very strange people, the Jews, with all of their religious practices and disputes and arguments and things, and festivals. And I got myself a job to support myself, with a cloth merchant, a kindly, older chap. And I got myself a flat to live in, very modest, up two or three flights in some not exactly high-rise of course at the time, but 3 or 4 stories high.

One day, as I was heading out to work, early in the morning, a little late, there was a commotion in the street. It was the day before the Sabbath. And as I asked a couple of people what was going on today, they said, “It's an execution. There are three men being taken out to the hill today.” And I thought, “Oh, no, not again. Another execution.” I had seen this before, I had even gone out to the hill and seen them strap these unfortunate men to the cross.

As I made to go across the street to get to work, I found now my way was blocked as the procession was winding slowly along. And there came a man that I had never seen before, carrying the crossbar across his shoulders. And he was obviously totally exhausted, and very badly beaten up. He was barely making it one step after the other. And the soldiers were guarding, and there were people around, and I asked who this was. And somebody said, “It's Jesus, the prophet from Galilee.” I said, “I've heard of him.” I've been here for several months, you see, but I'd never gone out to see him. I'd never seen him, but I knew he'd been in town a number of times.

But as his eyes looked around occasionally, his gaze fell upon me. And his eyes seemed to say, something like, “I would like to meet you.” And right away, I knew, I knew as soon as our eyes met, I knew he was innocent. I knew that whatever was going on here today was an absolute travesty of justice, and I burned with indignation immediately.

And as the procession was going by, I knew too that I had to follow that procession. I waited until the crowd went by, went down the back alley to where I worked and asked my boss for the day off. And agreeable as he usually was, he said, “All right, you can work overtime later on.” And I went out to the hill. I followed that procession out, just outside the city, the hill, “The Skull” they called it, Calvary, just off the highway leading away, where they put the crosses up, where they strapped the men and left them to die. I had never seen one of these things out to the end, but I knew today I was going to do that.

But they *nailed* him. I had never seen that before. And my heart was just torn in two. And there was a crowd of people gathering around. Not a big crowd, but a small crowd of people, plus travelers coming to and from the city. Most had seen all this before. They were inured to that, I guess. But some of the ones who were standing at the Cross were shouting at him and yelling insults. I was outraged! And I turned to them and said, “Don’t say that! He’s innocent, can’t you see that? He hasn’t done a thing! We’re the ones who deserve to be up there, not him!” And I took a punch at one of them and we wound up in a big fight, rolling on the ground, several people involved, until the Roman soldiers came over with their staves, and started to break it up. And I took a rather heavy blow on the shoulder, as I can recall.

And then He died, very quickly, obviously well before they thought he would. He died. Before He died, he had looked again around and his gaze had caught mine again, and seemed to be saying the same thing: “I would like to meet you.” And I was thinking to myself, “I would love to meet this gentlemen, but I can’t. He’s dying before my eyes.” What an idiot I was not to go into the city those other times I’d heard he was here. I had missed that.

And after he died and they were taking his body down from the cross, there were a number of women standing around, but one in particular stood out. She was consumed with grief, obviously, but saying nothing. I knew, inside, this must be his mother. And I went over to her, and I told her how sorry I was. And if I could have done something, I would have done it. And she looked at me through tear-filled eyes, unable to speak. But one of the other women close by leaned over to me and said, “She just wants you to know that she appreciates your concern very much.”

And I helped to bury him. And as I was heading back into the city, with a heavy, heavy heart, just inside the city gates, I met a couple of relatively young men, although a bit older than I. And I needed to talk to somebody, and I started up a conversation with them. And it turned out that they were two of his disciples who had run away in fear. And I asked them all kinds of questions about him. And as they told me about him, I said to myself, “How I would have loved to have been a member of that company, but now it’s too late.” I was so fascinated by what they said, I invited them to come up and stay the night in my flat because they were afraid to go to the place they usually went, so they came. And we talked all night. The next day they took me to meet some of the others of the company, and they accepted me as though I was one of their own. And I thought, “I have missed the boat. The story of my life. I have missed it. I was supposed to have met this man and been taught by him and I’ve missed it.”

On the third day, as most of them were getting ready to go home (most of them were from the north), getting ready to leave, bidding farewell to one another, a lot of them, some of the women came running in the door and said, “The tomb is empty!” And not only that, one of them said, “I saw Him. He’s alive!” Nobody could believe it, as much as they wanted to. Peter and John then took off running as fast as they could outside town, and when they came back, Peter said, “It’s true. He’s appeared to me too. He’s alive!” Later that night, he appeared to the Eleven. Two other disciples came back into town from a journey and said he had appeared to them. And then, before too long he appeared to the rest of us too.

So you see, I did meet Him, and He changed my life. It was never the same after that. There’s an awful lot more to this story, I can’t tell it in such a short time. It just goes on and on. I wound up

being in the Upper Room with the hundred and twenty when the Holy Ghost fell, and all of that. If the Lord ever gives me time, maybe I'll write it out. I've never been able to do that. Why am I telling it to you? I'm not really sure, but I sense the Lord wants it told.

You see, the Cross takes my words away. I don't have any words about the Cross. It's too monstrous, I find, even to think about it. And, you know, I continue to feel as though I want to tell Him, "Jesus, Master, don't do it. Don't do it. Don't die! Don't suffer!" And it's like He looks at me and says, "But I wanted to do it. I wanted to do it. It has something to do with love." I don't know about you, but that's the kind of love that I still have a lot to learn about. But I'm willing to learn, and I know He's ready to teach. And I know just as surely as I met him in that mind's eye drama seven years ago, I have met Him since, many times, because He lives. And you, I presume, perhaps, have met him too, or if you haven't, you can, because He's ready to meet us anytime. All we have to do is open the door.