

“What’s So Good About Good Friday?”

“When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

What’s so good about Good Friday?

It’s a question that was asked in a recent Confirmation Class, and one that I have often thought about on this day we remember the crucifixion of Our Lord. How can such a day be thought of as “good”? What “good” is there in such a dark day, the day we remember our Lord’s death on the Cross at Golgotha, the place of the skull. Why isn’t it called “Bad Friday,” a word that would be far more appropriate on this day when “*they crucified my Lord*”?

While some cultures have other names for this day (in Germany it is *Karfreitag*, “Sorrowful Friday”), the English reference to this day as “good” may come from the definition of this word as “*a day on which a religious observance is held*” (Oxford English Dictionary). The earliest use of “good Friday” is found in the South English Legendary of 1290. The Roman Catholic Church’s Baltimore Catechism states that Good Friday is good because “*Christ showed His great love to man, and purchased for him every blessing.*” But that doesn’t answer the question “*what’s so ‘good’ about Good Friday*”!

Good Friday is the most somber day of the year for Christians. If we were able to gather in worship, we would come into a worship space that had been stripped on the night of Maundy Thursday of all paraments and worship furnishings, leaving us with a barren altar devoid of the usual liturgical colors of the season. The atmosphere would be one of great solemnity; there would be none of the usual joyful greetings when we come into our sanctuary, and the music would lack any hint of celebration and rejoicing. There would be no celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the only day of the year when we do not gather at the Lord’s Table to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. Our worship service would center on the reading of the Passion According to John, in which Jesus is betrayed and arrested, condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, and taken to “*the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha*” (John 19:17), where Jesus is crucified under an inscription that reads “*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*” Our worship would end in silence; we would leave our sanctuary deeply saddened, going into a world in which the name given this day seems like an insult.

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In the fear and uncertainty of these troubling times, our attention is focused on that place called Golgotha where our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified. The Gospel writers record seven words that Jesus cries out while in the agony of his death, words that span emotions from forgiveness (“*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*” – Luke 23:34) to despair (“*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” – Matthew 27:46) to assurance (“*Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” – Luke 23:43). Jesus’ final words from the Cross are not the end of the story of this man from Nazareth; they continue the teaching of the one who knows that all has now been accomplished, that soon this Roman instrument of death will be transformed into a means of life, the symbol of the faith in the one who “*for our sake was crucified under Pontius Pilate.*” (Nicene Creed).

In John's account of the crucifixion, Jesus utters three words from the Cross. When he sees his mother, who has come along with *"his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene"* (John 19:25) together with *"the disciple whom he had loved"* (probably John, the son of Zebedee), he says to his mother, *"'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."* (19:26-27). In make sure that he mother is cared for after his death, Jesus is offering a lesson that *"we should, with John, who accepts the charge to become the son of Mary, take care of one another, remembering always that it is through love that we glimpse the divine, and touch the cross of Christ."* (Jon Meacham).

In the knowledge that his mother is in the care of the beloved disciple, *"Jesus knew that all was now finished"* (19:28), which John reports to link Jesus' death to the beginning of his "hour" (*"Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father."* – 13:1). The verb "to finish" (*teleo*) is synonymous with the verb "to complete" (*teleioo*), which in John is used to describe Jesus' mission to complete God's work (*"The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me."* – 5:36). "All" (*panta*) refers to everything God has given Jesus (*"The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands."* – 3:35). *"Jesus is thus depicted as facing the moment of his death with the knowledge that he has completed the work God has given him."* (Gail O'Day).

It is in this certainty that he has accomplish God's Will that *"he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty.'" (19:28), the Scripture being Psalm 69:21: "They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."* While other Gospels report the offering of sour wine to Jesus (*"At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink."* – Matthew 27:48), in John Jesus takes the initiative and there are no reports of mockery accompanying this offer of sour wine (*"But others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.'" – Matthew 27:49*). Jesus remains a figure of dignity; his thirst *"symbolizes his willingness to embrace his death, and the offer of sour wine takes on an ironic note as one more example of the world's misunderstanding of him."* (O'Day). In the Fourth Gospel, the Crucifixion ends *"when Jesus received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."* (19:30). The moment of Jesus' death is a moment of profound sorrow; when these words are read in Good Friday worship, they are usually followed by a prolonged moment of silence in which worshipers contemplate the darkness and grief that fills this hour in which our Lord Jesus dies. But Jesus' words are not a final expression of defeat or despair, but a cry of confidence in his completion of God's work in the world (*"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do."* – 17:4). Jesus' death on the Cross is the final expression of his love for his own and his love for God.

- "There was one more thing that was finished that day, and that was the separation between Jesus and God. The distance was mostly physical, according to John, and was only temporary, but when Jesus gave up his spirit his thirst was slaked ... He had put his own body between them and those who meant to do them harm. He had demolished the rock around their hearts. He had shown them a dangerous new way to live. It was dark by the time they got him down and found a place to lay him. It was the sabbath, his turn to rest. His part was over. His work was done." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

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The sorrow of this permeates our lives in this time of separation as much as it surrounds the past and future gatherings of God's people on this day of Christ's Crucifixion and death. It is hard to see what good can

come out of a man's death; yet in the voice of Jesus that cries out in the hour of his agony we hear not the cries of a defeated man but one who knows that he has finished the work God has given him, that he has accomplished God's Will and has made the Cross the means through which those who will be baptized into Christ's death and resurrection have the assurance that death is not the final word for them, because Jesus Christ *"has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death."* (Small Catechism).

- "The cross of Christ is the death which we undergo one and for all in our baptism, and it is a death full of grace. The cross to which we are called is a daily dying in the power of the death which Christ died once and for all. In this way baptism means sharing in the cross of Christ. The believer passes under the yoke of the cross." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The "goodness" of Good Friday comes in the gospel promise that in his death Jesus overcame death's power to separate us from the love of God. Because of his death, we have the assurance that *"death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."* (Revelation 21:4). The message of the Cross gives us to pray when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we live in trust and hope because of what our Lord accomplished for us through his death on the Cross:

- "God of all grace, we give you thanks because by his death our Savior Jesus Christ destroyed the power of death, and by his resurrection he opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers. Make us certain that because he lives we shall live also, and that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, will be able to separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever." – ELW Funeral Service.

"We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. By your holy cross you have redeemed the world."

That's what so "good" about Good Friday!

Amen.