

Good Friday, 2024

Today is Good Friday. Isn't that an odd title? We call this day on which Jesus was crucified "good." What is good about it?

Isaiah says it is good because it was our infirmities he bore, our sufferings that he endured; he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole; by his stripes we were healed. The LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all, smitten for the sins of his people. He surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked. He took away the sins of many, and won pardon for their offenses.

The writer to the Hebrews says it is good because we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but who has, like us, been tested in every way, yet without sin. He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

The apostle John says it is good because on this day he brought secret disciples out of the shadows. One of the major themes of John's Gospel is that Jesus is the light of the world, and to follow him is to live in the day, not in the night. In John, chapter one, he says that light came into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it. When darkness and light show up for a fight, it is over immediately. Judas, for example, lived in the darkness. At the last supper, it says that Judas went out to betray Jesus. Then John adds, "and it was night."

Two other disciples also lived in the darkness—Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. They were afraid. Nicodemus originally visited Jesus at night. And Joseph kept his discipleship secret. But you cannot be a **secret** disciple of Jesus; you cannot follow the light and remain in the darkness. So John says that when Jesus died, these two shadow disciples came and asked for his body.

They outed themselves. They didn't care who knew; they walk in the light.

John also says that it was good because of the spirit God promises to pour upon us when we gaze upon him whom we have pierced. This statement is a quote from Zechariah chapter 12. When a New Testament author quotes from the Old Testament, they are almost begging us to go back and read the original. In the Zechariah text, Jerusalem is being besieged, and for some unknown reason, they execute a young man by piercing him through. Immediately the people realize their mistake and mourn the man's death. When this happens, the Lord says through Zechariah that, as "they gaze upon him whom they have pierced," God will pour out on them a spirit of mercy and intercession.

This is John's point. This is what is good. When we who have pierced Jesus—and who among us has not—God will give us *a spirit of mercy and intercession*. He will pour that spirit upon us. So, as we gaze upon a crucifix or an icon of the crucified Lord or the image of the dead Jesus in our hearts, God promises to bless us. And how we need that! I need a **spirit** of mercy—I can't just call up mercy by my own efforts. And intercession wears me out. I need God to give me that **spirit** through which I want to pray for others.

"They shall look upon him whom they have pierced..."
Forty some years ago, I had the privilege of living in the center of Rome while doing post-graduate studies. During those years I went to St. Peter's Basilica dozens of times—some times for papal liturgies, but more often just on my own, when no services were being held. But I would never leave St. Peter's without stopping for at least a few minutes of meditation and prayer before Michelangelo's *Pieta*, and I would never leave dry-eyed.

The pure and simple pain on the face of a mother holding the lifeless, eyes-closed body of her perfect son, gazing upon the one whom she alone had not pierced, says it all. The *Pieta* is incredible BEAUTY. Yet it tells the story of the horror of the cross. As Bonaventure says—“a coincidence of opposites.”

Let us, on this **Good** Friday, gaze upon him and say with Augustine:

O Beauty ever ancient,
O Beauty ever new,
You the mirror of my life renewed,
Let me find my life in you.

And that is a very good thing indeed.