

Sermon for Good Friday 2011

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

It used to be the custom in some places to hold a preaching service on Good Friday. This was before our current 1979 Book of Common Prayer; because its predecessor (the 1928 prayerbook), while strangely providing proper *Eucharistic* readings for this one day of the year on which the Eucharist cannot be celebrated, did not provide for a special liturgy of the day (like we're now observing). So it was customary to gather in the church for about three hours and hear seven sermons, one on each of the seven last things Jesus said from the cross.

As difficult as it would be to sell a three hour church service today, I think there was some wisdom to this practice, particularly focusing on discrete phrases from the passion narrative. There is too much of eternal import in the words we just

heard from St. John's Passion to cover in a single sermon, and I think we preachers are generally forced to focus on just a little bit (a little, discrete phrase) and let the rest of the narrative stand on its own.

And so, I want to focus very briefly on just one of these "seven last words", and let that long Gospel reading and our rather full Good Friday liturgy stand on its own and tell the rest of the story.

"When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother'"

This is, in fact, the last of Jesus' seven sayings from the Cross directed at particular people, and one of only two such sayings (the other being Our Lord's comfortable words to the criminal hanging beside him in Luke's Gospel: *Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise!*). Everything else he says from the Cross is either directed to

the Father or else to nobody in particular. I think that this is significant, because I believe that these words can be understood on at least two levels.

First, there is the literal, though nonetheless powerful level of meaning. Jesus of Nazareth was a man, a man in tremendous pain who had been suffering a great trial since well before he was nailed onto that ancient implement of torture. Let us turn our focus briefly from the foot of the cross to the upper room the night before.

In the words Jesus spoke to his disciples that night we can detect the pain of impending loss. Our Lord was not fearful of the physical torture he would no doubt endure, but he was clearly troubled for the sake of his disciples. He senses *their* fear, the great angst each of them feels about their Rabbi's impending death, saying "Let not your hearts troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms."

He confides to his disciples the fear he feels that they might fall away from the faith once he has left them. He calls them "little children" for the first time, which is neither a term of derogation nor of condescension, but of sincere love for those whom he loves as one would a son or daughter, with the sort of love that cannot bear to consider that child going through an instant of pain, much less the kind of death most of the disciples would endure.

And, to my mind, most gut-wrenchingly, he says "I no longer call you servants...but I have called you friends." How often do we have one so much our better express such an intimate and loving statement and truly mean it? These men had followed our Lord for three years, and here, finally, just as they are about to lose him, the depth of the love he has for them is made explicit.

And then we return to the Cross, and behold the disciple whom Jesus loved most of all, and the

Blessed Mother from whom he could never refuse a request, so great was his love for her. These two whom Jesus loved so much he gives to each other. Such tenderness of feeling our Lord and God is able to muster in the midst of suffering greater than any of us could imagine! Such warmth and gentleness to sinful man, for whose grievous sins he is at that very moment suffering!

You see, while on one level he is caring for the welfare of a man named John and a woman named Mary, he is on another level saying the same thing to us. He gives us into each other's care, and in an even greater gift, he asks us to behold our mother the Church, to care for her and to be cared for by her. As He was giving us the gift of forgiveness, suffering on our account, he could have decided that the Grace of forgiveness was enough. Instead, even as we were crucifying him, he gives us yet another gift of Grace. He gives us a mother.

In a few moments we will pray again the ancient solemn collects of Good Friday, and we will conclude those prayers by praying for this Mother we have been given. We will pray that the whole world may see that "wonderful and sacred mystery" which enables us to love one another in a new and powerful way. We will pray that the whole world may see her power to be God's vehicle for Grace, to raise up that which has been cast down and to renew this old sin-sick world. May we, who are the Church, see the potential Christ has given us to love those who spurn us and to be gracious to those who don't even know the meaning of Grace. May we be given the opportunity to die to self for the sake of a hostile world, knowing that Christ is still reigning from his tree and through him the Father's love will be made known perfectly and ubiquitously and eternally.

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Amen.