

Good Friday, Year A
April 22, 2011
The Reverend Roger E. Nelson

The first of seven short sentences that Jesus spoke as he hung upon the Cross at Calvary was:

Farther, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

These are rather remarkable words, especially since most people today accept the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was unfairly convicted in a rush that had politics at its roots, far more than any sense of justice or fairness,

Indeed, such a trumped up trial of any similarly controversial person today would undoubtedly bring a strong protest and backlash. The lawyers among us, and there are considerable in this parish, would quickly form a "Committee to Defend the Nazarene" and file a flurry of motions in both state and federal courts. The activists among us, and again there are many at Epiphany, would be making signs saying "Barrabbas, not Jesus" and circling Calvary singing songs and protesting this miscarriage of justice. The airwaves of talk radio would be abuzz, the TV commentators would be having a field day interviewing "experts"; and the youth would be rallied via Facebook and Twitter to fill Boston Common for a protest rally.

The actions surrounding the arrest, trial, conviction, and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth would become a cause to fight for justice and fairness in our legal and political systems. The outcry would be so ferocious that there is little doubt but that the execution of Jesus would have been put on hold and he would be returned to jail. BUT this was 2000 years ago, Roman power and justice was unchallenged, and Jesus himself did not protest or argue his innocence.

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Jesus chooses acceptance, submission, surrender, rather than call forth the legions of angels who would be there to protect and rescue him, if he had so desired or bid.

Of course, being fully human, Jesus could not help but to protest and loudly question his fate:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Using ancient words from the psalms so deeply ingrained in Jewish and Christian spirituality, his cry of despair echoes down through the ages so that even this evening we can feel within us his hurt and pain and even some betrayal. Why, God, why is the question, the seed of doubt that echoes in our hear of hearts, that challenges our faith to its outer limits. What kind of God calls his only son, calls us to such a choice, deserting us to the whims of a rule of law that only seeks its own self preservation, and has little room for mercy or forgiveness.

Jesus is left with only one real choice, namely to submit to the will of God, to surrender his own willful desires and hopes, and to accept the path that God has chosen for his life.

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

And so it is finished and tonight's gospel says:

Then (Jesus) bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

All that I have said so far this evening is from the human perspective. That is appropriate for we are human and as orthodox Christians we believe that Jesus was fully human. So it is natural to be puzzled and to argue over the events on Mount Calvary that first Good Friday. Yet, this is not all that these events are about. There is another whole dimension to them that our human reasoning and feelings cannot capture. For we also believe as Christians that Jesus was fully God, one of the three equal persons that together reveal full nature of the Godhead, the Holy One, the source/cause of our creation, redemption and ongoing sanctification. And if that is so, then it means that the One who died upon the Good Friday Cross was not just Jesus of Nazareth, but also the very person and substance of the Godhead itself. And that to us, or at least to me, is incomprehensible, beyond understanding, removed from my experience.

Yet I want to believe it; I need to believe it; I do believe it!

The truth cannot be put into words. We have just heard our wonderful choir sing this story in Tomas de Luis Victoria's Passion of Saint John. Music helps to bring us close to the reality of this evening. It adds dimensions of feeling and listening that words alone cannot evoke. Yet even it falls short of expressing the full and essential nature of the Cross, of what happened on Calvary so many centuries ago, and what continues to happen in the vastness of the cosmos today.

God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son, that all who believe in God, might not perish, but have everlasting life.

And so in the end, no words, no music, no thoughts, no feelings can capture the reality of the Cross. We can only stand in its shadow in awe and wonder at a love so great, a Savior so compassionate, a God so merciful.

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand,
the shadow of a might rock within a weary land,
a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
from the burning of the noontide heat and the burden of the day.

Upon the cross of Jesus mine eyes at times can see
the very dying form of one who suffered there for me;
and from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess:
the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.

I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face;
content to let my pride go by, to know no gain or loss,
my sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.