

Good Friday Homily 040210

In the name of the Paschal Lamb who willingly went to slaughter for our sins,
Amen.

On Good Friday we are faced with the very real and very human story of Jesus' Passion and death. More than any other time, on this day we are asked to enter into Jesus' suffering and to personally connect with the events that took place on that Friday in Jerusalem, almost two thousand years ago.

When we go deep into the Passion, we hopefully experience the "what" of the story. That is, we try to get some understanding of *what happened* to Jesus, and what He felt as He was arrested, beaten, interrogated, humiliated and finally executed. But for me such an examination of (or immersion into) the details of the narrative can occasionally tempt me to forget the "why" of the story.

Walter Wangerin, Lutheran pastor and instructor of creative writing at Valparaiso University, wrote a book entitled, Reliving the Passion. In it, he wrote an account that includes what might have been going through Jesus' mind *before* that Good Friday – when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying to His Father in Heaven, preparing Himself for the next day's events. This is the way Wangerin imagines that it might have happened:

Night. There is a cold light falling from the indifferent stars – a light like the finest of snows, pale on the ground, pale on the hair and shoulders of a sad band of men moving outside the city.

They pause by a grove of black trees. Four men separate themselves and enter the trees.

Listen! One man is groaning. His breath comes in quick pants, compulsively. Listen: 'Oh. Oh. Oh, God. Oh.' He goes alone, now, deeper among the trees – while the other three arrange themselves on the ground, their backs against the tree trunks. These three begin to nod. Soon, they sleep.

The woods are pale and silent.

That one man, totally alone, is swaying back and forth as if dizzy, his face in his hands. Suddenly he crumples to the ground. 'Abba! Abba!' The sound is strangled in his throat. His fingers dig dirt like the roots of the trees. His chin and his beard grind against the earth.

'Abba, Father, I don't want to do this. Please! You can do anything; then take this cup away from me – '

The man's voice is hoarse, a kind of guttural barking. But then he sucks air and howls at the top of his lungs, 'Hell is in that cup! Death and damnation are in that cup! My Father, my Father, it will tear me away from you! No, I don't want to do this! No! Sin is in that cup – and if I drink it you won't look at me, you will loathe me, I will hate myself! I don't want to drink it! Abba, Abba, take the cup away from me – '

The man twists his body underneath the trees, then holds himself in a tense, unnatural posture, his face upward, his eyes shut, his breathing sharp through his teeth. He grimaces, as if smiling, then whispers almost inaudibly, whispers as soft as the leaves: 'Nevertheless ... not what I want ... what you want ... do.'

When, in the pale starlight, this man returns to the three he left behind, he finds them slumped and snoring. He is alone. Even beside his friends he is completely alone.

And so he prays a second time as though he had not prayed the first. He prays till the sweat runs down his temples. His voice is a wolf's howl in the woods, 'Abba!' – and still his friends are slumbering.

His third prayer is so quiet and so private an anguish that his body does not move. He waits in darkness, in a perfect silence for an answer.

And when he returns to his friends the final time, waking them with the news of his own betrayal – ‘Rise, let us be going’ – this, in that hour, is what the solitary man is doing. Drinking. Drinking.

On that Good Friday; as Jesus made His way up the hill of Golgotha – abandoned by those who professed love for Him, beaten and bloody, crown of thorns digging into his tender scalp, covered by a purple robe as a visible reminder of the shouts of insult and belittlement that accompany Him – on *that* day He carries not only the heavy wood of the cross, but He also carries a full belly. On that Friday we ironically refer to as “Good,” Jesus took with him all of the horrible sin the “death and damnation” that His Father had shown Him were His to drink. And His taking all of the world’s sin into Himself was an incredible and terrible burden to bear. But *that* burden – and all of the physical pain and suffering He endured that day – were nothing in comparison to that pain; the pain of separation from His Father in Heaven.

On that Friday long ago, Jesus – the sinless one; the spotless Paschal lamb – agreed to do the one thing that would cause Him the most immeasurable pain. He drank the cup of sin and death and He separated Himself from God so that He could fully experience what was on both sides of the chasm between God and humans. Jesus tore Himself away from the father by drinking the cup of our sinfulness and thereby became the bridge across that chasm of separation.

Amen.