

Palm Sunday, C

Sometimes I wonder if we modern people are not losing, or perhaps have already lost, our capacity to be deeply moved by human suffering. The kind of world we live in without doubt has an effect on the human spirit. One hour with a newspaper or thirty minutes in front of the television exposes one to an overwhelming amount of tragedy. Day in and day out, we are served a steady diet of war, murder, terrorism, kidnapping, rape, robbery, and torture. The more we see of man's inhumanity to man, the less we seemed to be shocked by it.

Then we come to Holy Week and are confronted once more with the cross of Christ, and I fear that prior conditioning has impact on our ability to feel and see what that cross really means. So I want us for a few moments to turn our attention to a tough man, who was actually there and saw and heard everything that happened. I refer to the Roman centurion who commanded soldiers who carried out the crucifixion of Jesus. There can be little doubt that he had seen and participated in this kind of thing many times. Crucifixions were somewhat common occurrences in that Roman world. As one of the poets has said, "Those were rough and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap."

That centurion had gotten used to the business of seeing men nailed to crosses and watching them hang there until they died. But despite that prior conditioning, he found himself strangely and deeply moved by the death of Jesus. When it all was over, and the figure on the central cross

hung silent and still, the centurion was heard to whisper, “Surely, this was an innocent man.”

Let us be careful not to overstress the meaning of that comment. Surely, it was not a profession of Christian faith; nor was it a theological statement on the sinless perfection of Christ. It was simply the honest reaction of a tough man who saw and heard and felt the awful shame of Calvary. He had seen other men die, but never like that. He had heard dying men pray, but never had any of them prayed for their persecutors. That centurion, despite his over-exposure to human suffering, found himself deeply moved by the death of Jesus.

Such has been the historic power of the cross to disrupt and disturb human gratification. What it did to the Roman centurion, it has done to thousands of others across the centuries, which suggests the possibility that it could yet do the same to us.

When life begins to harden us to the tragedy of human suffering, one of the surest signs is that we feel no involvement in it or responsibility for it. No doubt, the centurion had trained his mind to think that way. After all, he was only a man doing his job. Suffering and death were all part of his work. Crucifixions had probably bothered him at first, but not anymore.

Perhaps, he could not remember the last time his conscience had disturbed him very much about anything. But this was something

different, and suddenly he saw himself as part of an evil system that could take a totally innocent man and nail him to a cross.

You and I have not seen our guilt for what it really is until we have faced it in this light. Sin is bad enough for what it does in and to the lives of the guilty. But far and away the worst thing about sin is the suffering it causes to the lives of those who were not involved, are not guilty, and do not deserve it.

There is a proverb about “the crime of the fathers having effect on the children to the third and fourth generations.” That saying has caused some people to rise up in protest against the injustice of life. We may say, “That’s not fair. Why should children and even grandchildren have to pay for the sins of their fathers?” And that is the whole point of the matter. Of course, it is not fair. But this is not something that God does. It is instead something that we do, something that is built into the very nature of sin. No man ever drinks full cup of his own guilt. Always some of it spills over in the lives of those around him – his children, his family, maybe his friends. The innocent do bear the sins of the guilty. That is the way life works, and not even God can change it. The centurion saw that as he stood by the cross. Could you and I see the same?

Take one step further and see that the cross should disturb us not simply at the point of our guilt, but also at the point of our goodness. That centurion had a code of honor that he wanted to live up to. He was

reasonably faithful to the moral and ethical standards of his own class. He had been diligent in his work, thus moving through the ranks up to the level of an officer.

If you and I meet those same standards in our time, we can safely consider ourselves good people. No doubt, the centurion felt the same. But that day at Calvary his pride must have collapse down around him. He watched a strong and brave man dying unjustly without bitterness, without resentment, without rancor. To keep the rules is one thing, to move to a level of living that no rule or law could ever require is quite another. Until we have seen the cross in that light, we have not understood what true goodness really means.

I address you today as respectable citizens of this community. We are not bad people in the traditional sense of that word. Judging by accepted standards, it could be argued that we are good men and women. We have certain principles that we live by. We keep the rules of decency and honor. But if the standard of true goodness in what Christ did on Calvary, then we, my friends, have little or no claim to goodness at all.

This is one of the strange things about the disturbing power of the cross. It not only troubles us about our sin, but neither will it let us rest content with our so - called goodness. But there is a great paradox: the same cross that disturbs us so deeply is also our greatest source of consolation. There we see our sin at its very worst, but there we also find forgiveness for it. There we are reminded of what goodness really

means, and we know how far we missed it. But there we can also find strength and courage to back off and try again. The cross is a strange factor in our world. I hope we never cease to be disturbed by it. And I hope we never fail to find the consolation that flows from it. **Amen.**