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Good Friday: Are we ready to forgive and to love?

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 28, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

I think if we ask the question, "Why did Jesus die?" most of us would say, "He died for our sins and He saved us from the consequences of our sins," but in fact, there's only one very brief reference in the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus that would indicate that He died for our sins.
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In Matthew's Gospel, when He changes the wine into His blood, He says, "This is the cup offered for the forgiveness of sins." Otherwise, it doesn't indicate that in the Scriptures.

Good Friday
Isaiah 52:13?53:12
Psalm 31:2, 6, 12-13, 15-16, 17, 25
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
John 18:1?19:42
Full text of the readings [1]

Probably it would be a better question to ask ourselves, why was Jesus killed?

Why did they do this to Him? Why did they hate Him so much that they were ready to kill Him?

The answer seems to be that Jesus spoke such a radical message and asked for such dramatic changes in our lives that we really don't quite accept Jesus. If you think of what's recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say to you, 'Do not even have anger or vengeance in your heart against your brother or sister. In fact, even if you are offering your gift at the altar and there you remember a brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift and go first to be reconciled."

Never hold any vengeance or hatred in your heart. Nothing is more important than reaching out, to forgive, to be reconciled, not even worship.

Jesus says it's more important to be reconciled with your brother or sister. He goes on to say, "You've heard it said of old, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you never offer any violence against violence. Instead, love. Return good for evil. Never offer violent resistance."

We heard in the Gospel just now in the garden, when Jesus' very life was threatened, they came to Him with swords and clubs, ready to arrest Him. Peter tries to defend Him with a sword and what does Jesus say? "Put it away."

He rejects violence for any reason whatsoever. In fact, one Scripture scholar tells us, "Jesus taught us how to die, not how to kill," and yet, over these hundreds of years since Jesus, we find it very difficult to accept His teaching, to reject all violence. Never turn to violence.

So we came, during the history of the Church, to somehow justify killing and war. The first Christians who heard the message of Jesus in the beginning, for 300 years would never use violence, and yes, they also found it difficult.

When you turn to the first letter of Paul to the Church of Corinth, you discover that Paul had to tell them, "Jesus did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the Good News." The Good News is a message that tells us, "Here

am I, preaching Christ crucified," the Christ who rejected violence but instead allowed Himself to be put to death.

Even as He was dying, what was He doing? Forgiving. Reaching out in love. That's what Jesus asks of us.

There were those who could not accept that, or the fact that Jesus was so often reaching out to the poor, to those who were marginalized, who were rejected.

One time He was having a meal in the house of one of the Jewish leaders, and a woman came in to wash His feet with her tears. The man says, "If this were really a prophet, He would know who was touching Him." This person would have nothing to do with a sinner, but Jesus welcomed sinners. He ate meals with them. He never rejected anyone, and so, because He always reached out in love, people found it very hard to follow Him.

This week, just before Jesus was put to death, He did one of the most dramatic things that we find recorded in the Gospels.

He went into the temple and knocked over the tables of the moneychangers, and drove them out. "You've made the house of God a den of thieves." They were exploiting the poor, and Jesus could not tolerate that, and became angry. He drove them away.

He always hungered and thirsted for justice, and would not abide any injustice, and yet, He asks us now to follow Him, to accept His way. At the time of his life, many people could not accept it. So they said, "We have to get rid of Him." Kill Him. Stop this message, the message of weakness and foolishness.

When Paul was writing to the Church of Corinth, and telling them how he had to preach Christ crucified, he goes on to say, to the Jewish leaders, that's a scandal. It's a stumbling block that they couldn't get over, to think of God on a cross crucified, helpless and reaching out in forgiveness. To them, it was a stumbling block. To the Greeks, it was foolishness, crazy. How could anyone expect you to forgive the ones who were putting you to death? So they said it was foolishness, and they wouldn't accept it, the so-called wise people, but that was the message of Jesus.

Paul says finally in that passage in his letter to the Church at Corinth, "The weakness of God is stronger than human strength, and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." Those who can accept the way of Jesus find it a way that leads ultimately to the fullness of life, to peace, to the reign of God.

In the very last year before Pope John Paul II died, he visited Spain, the last trip that he took during his life. When he was there, a reporter wrote about him, "Still filled with a palpable sadness over the war in Iraq, a war that he had tried to prevent, Pope John Paul told an audience of hundreds of thousands of people that what he desperately wanted for the world was peace, and he kept repeating this. 'The world needs peace. The world must end war. We must have peace.'"

He kept saying that like a mantra. Then the next day, he spoke to tens of thousands of young people, something he always did when he went on one of those trips. He said to them, "Beloved young people, you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world," and then he went on speaking to them and he condemned what he called a spiral of violence, terrorism and war. He condemned all of that. He said to them, "Keep yourselves far from every form of exaggerated nationalism, racism and intolerance. Instead, respond to violence and hatred with the fascinating power of love."

Respond to violence and hatred only with that fascinating power of love. What Jesus teaches us through His death is that love and forgiveness can transform something that is very evil. His being crucified in such a terrible way can be transformed into something good. Out of death comes life when we live according to the

way of Jesus. Reject violence and follow only the path of peace.

So as we continue to reflect on the events of the first Good Friday, it would be important for us to ask ourselves and reflect deeply, "Why was Jesus killed?" It was because people could not accept His message.

Are we ready to accept that message and live according to His way of forgiveness and love?

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Ann Catholic Church in Frankfort, Mich.]

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