

Good Friday April 2, 2021

It was on this day, 16 years ago, that Pope Saint John Paul II died. During the last year of his life, he suffered greatly with Parkinson's disease. Throughout so much of his life, he stood up for the truth and for the most vulnerable members of society. Now, as he faced illness and death, he wanted to share another message with the world. He wanted to be a model of how to suffer with dignity, love, and faith.

One of the most moving photographs of Pope Saint John Paul II was taken on the last Good Friday of his life in 2005. He was too weak to attend the services at Saint Peter's Basilica or the Stations of the Cross at the Coliseum. Instead, he watched them on television, all the while clasping a large crucifix to his heart. Through it all, his eyes were full of tears of love as he gazed upon our Lord who loved him enough to die for him.

In his own suffering, Pope Saint John Paul II drew strength from the suffering of Jesus. His pains were another way of being more perfectly united to our Lord. Because of his love for Jesus, his own sufferings were transformed from something he had to merely endure into something that he could offer up for the salvation of the world.

That image of Pope Saint John Paul II taught the world as much about the love of God as any of his writings and homilies ever did.

On this day, we gather to remember all that Jesus did to save us. Though He had the power to call down legions of angels from heaven to save Him, He allowed Himself to be betrayed, tortured, and crucified. Though He had the power to come down from the cross and show the world that He was truly the Son of God, He endured it all out of love for us. A quote from an unknown author says it best, "It was not nails that held Jesus to the cross but love." Jesus accepted the cruelest of deaths to show us how much we are loved by God.

By dying on the cross, Jesus also taught us how we should live. Suffering is an undeniable part of life. As much as we try to avoid it, it finds us. We suffer physical pains and emotional distress. Very often, we are more distressed at the suffering of our loved ones than from our own suffering. Whenever we suffer, there is one question that is always on our lips - why? Why me? Why this? Why now?

It is right for us to rebel against suffering. It is not part of God's original plan, and deep down we know it. Suffering is not what God wants for us. But, for some mysterious reason, He allows it. And, if He allows it, it is because He can bring good out of it. We cannot always see what that good might be. It might even sound offensive to say that given all the injustices people have suffered throughout history. But our faith

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tells us that it must be true. If we have a good and all-powerful God, then He must have a good reason for allowing suffering.

Jesus teaches us that, no matter what we are facing, we can give ourselves over to God with confidence and love that He will make all things new. In today's second reading, we hear about how Jesus offered prayers with loud cries and tears. Jesus did not want to suffer and die any more than we do. Yet, He trusted God. He abandoned His spirit into God's hands out of love. And, by doing so, He found peace for His spirit and salvation for our souls.

There is also a tone of defiance to this day. Death does not have the last word. Suffering does not have to break us. On the cross, Jesus saved us from sin and destroyed death. The devil did his best to snuff out God's plan of salvation. He marshalled all the cruelty this world had to offer in hopes of putting an end to Jesus. But they failed. The devil wasn't counting on the power of love to overcome hate and the power of goodness to overcome evil.

On the cross, Jesus opened up the way to salvation for us. Whatever we have suffered in this life will be paid back to us a thousand fold in the life to come. St Paul assures us of this when he writes in his letter to the Romans, "For the sufferings of this life are nothing compared to the glory that is to be revealed in us". We have an inheritance awaiting us in heaven, a life that cannot be ended by death, a glorified body that cannot suffer, and a soul healed from the wound of sin.

No doubt, when Pope Saint John Paul II was clutching the crucifix to his heart, he was thinking not only of the love of Jesus but the life that awaited him in Heaven.

Like Pope Saint John Paul II, when we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, we can endure anything. When we unite ourselves to His sufferings on the cross, nothing becomes impossible for us. When we realize that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, then we can go forward with courage and confidence. We will not be broken. We will not be crushed. In Christ Jesus, we are more than conquerors.

We have reflected on the horrible scene of Calvary. Yet we are not just spectators but participants. The story of Jesus' death is our story. It was because of our sin that He was crucified and at the same time it is for our sins that He died. This brutal scene is both our shame and our hope. It teaches us to feel sorry for our sins and also to trust that they are forgiven. It gives us courage to take up our own cross in this life with our hopes fixed on the life to come. No matter how dark the world gets around us, we carry the light of faith, hope, and love. Jesus has conquered all the forces of evil

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and will come soon to save us. The cross assures us of that - the love of God made visible and standing victorious even in the midst of cruelty, suffering, and death.