

Good Friday
(Mar. 21, 2008)

The Cross

Once more we have listened to the story of the passion and death of Jesus. Many thoughts perhaps crowd our minds at a time like this. Let me suggest one simple idea on this Good Friday: our God suffers with us.

Our God suffers with us. Even the Hebrew Scriptures would agree with the idea that God knows our suffering. How could He not, being God. But what our own Christian belief adds to that is the fact that God, the very God who made us, became one of us, took on our flesh and blood and bones, ate and drank as we do, laughed and cried. He spoke; he slept; he touched; he healed. And like all of us he suffered. And, as will inevitably happen to all of us, he died.

So it is not only because God is all powerful and all knowing that God understands our suffering. It is also – and perhaps, most importantly – that God has personally experienced our suffering. In Jesus God has had a most vivid and profound experience of what it means to be weak like the weakest of us. He knows what it is like to be snubbed by people from his own town, to be insulted by local authorities, to have one of his closest friends swear that he does not know him, to have someone he loves betray him with a kiss

Suffering, dear friends, like death, is inevitable. When it comes we have a choice. We can enter into ourselves and suffer alone. But such suffering diminishes us. Or we can open ourselves to others. Indeed as a Christian, as a member of Christ's own Body, I dare not insist on suffering alone. Suffering is my share in the Passion of Christ. I suffer with him and with all the other members of the Body of Christ. Some of us were taught to say the Morning Offering when we were children. Remember that? It's still appropriate. I offer you my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day. United with Christ's Passion, my passion can touch my brothers and sisters with redeeming grace, can lend them the courage of Christ, the peace of Christ, yes, even the joy of Christ. I suffer with them and they with me.

There are those in our world who say that the existence of suffering is

inconsistent with the existence of a loving God. But we who believe that our loving God experienced our suffering and even our death in the person of Jesus Christ know that this is not true.

In Luke's gospel, after Jesus has been beaten, crowned with thorns, stripped, and nailed to the cross he looks upon the people who have done these things to him and cries out, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." And later he tells the repentant thief, "This day you will be with me in Paradise." In his weakest, most vulnerable moment, as he is dying, he cannot forget why he came, the work his Father had given him to do: to heal the wounds of sin and division, to reconcile us all to one another and to the Father – and so he forgives. He forgives all those who are responsible for his death, including all of us, especially all of us who are the reason for his coming into this world in the first place. It's an extraordinary act of love.

I could not help but think, as I reflected on those words of forgiveness, of the incident that shocked us all a few months ago when a deranged man entered a small school house in Pennsylvania and cruelly fired upon a group of Amish children, killing several of them. You may have heard about the grandfather of two small girls who were critically wounded in that incident. He went to one hospital and held his granddaughter in his arms while she died. Then he went to a second hospital and held the other child in his arms while she died. Then he went to the family of the man who had killed them and held them in his arms while he forgave them.

In the world we live in today, so full of hatred, violence, and war, it is a story of salvation every bit as extraordinary as the cry of Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them."

As I think of this incident, as I recall how our God suffers with us, and as I reflect on those words of forgiveness, other words of Jesus come to mind, "Go thou, and do likewise."

On this Good Friday many people are experiencing the pain and agony of the cross because of war and terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Israel, the land where Jesus lived and died, there seems no end to the discord between Israelis and Palestinians. We think of those who have been killed or wounded or are missing. We think, too, of their parents,

their children, their wives and husbands. We hope sincerely that they, too, may understand that the God who chose the way of Golgotha may make some sense of their deprivation and suffering. We pray, too, that they may know that from the cross our God understands and reaches out to them.

In the first week his Spiritual Exercises, after he has asked the retreatant to reflect upon his sins and the sinfulness of the world, St. Ignatius sends us to the cross and tells us to look at what love has done for us. Perhaps as we come to the cross today we could think of three questions Ignatius puts to the retreatant and continue to reflect on our response to these questions after we leave this church today: what have we done for Christ, we, all of us together. What are we doing for Christ? What will we do for Christ?