

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for April 2, 2021 ~ Good Friday

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

There is much we do not know about Jesus. The gospels are hardly helpful in reconstructing a full life of the historical Jesus. There are conflicts regarding the date and place of his birth. We know nothing of his early, formative years. Various gospels place him in various places in Judea. Few external sources, only Josephus, give us a record of him and his work.

There is only one fact of Jesus life that seems to be almost universally undisputed. He was crucified. In his early thirties, after a brief career around Galilee, the Romans arrested him, tried him, and then nailed him to a cross to die. *Jesus was crucified.*

But thousands were crucified in his day, particularly Jews. One could say that Jesus was just one among many thousands who died that horrible death. If that is the case, why are Christians gathering around the world today, some 2000 years later, in somber surroundings, to commemorate the event in the life of a single individual? Why not, instead, remember all who perished in that particular holocaust?

The answer is simply this: The Christian claim is not only that Jesus was crucified, but that *he was crucified for us*. Crucifixion itself is tragedy enough. But crucified for *me*? As Paul says, “why, you might be willing to die for a good person, but he shows his love for us in that, at the right time, Jesus died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). *Us!*

It may take time in the course of human development and maturity for any of us to really appreciate such an act. Theologian Paul Tillich lived the life of a typical late-19th century young German scholar until serving as a chaplain in the Imperial German army in World War I. Walking one night after the Battle of Champaign, in the garish lights of the battlefield, down the rows of the dead and the rows of the dying, Tillich recalled, “There and then I became a tragic realist.” Many of you know what he is talking about. You have been there, too. It is the great growing up that we go through in life, when nursery tales fail and we enter the world of the tragic. In the dimension of our Christian faith, it comes when we realize the personal, transforming impact of the news that this Jesus, one of untold thousands of Jews who died in first century Judea, died for you – when the tragic, touching, terrible realization dawns that in some mysterious way you are a direct beneficiary of his sacrifice.

Years ago, long before the tragic fire, an archbishop of Paris stood in the pulpit of Notre Dame Cathedral. He was there to preach the sermon, and his whole sermon was built around a story. Thirty years earlier, he said, three young students had come into this cathedral. They were rough, rude, cynical men who thought all religion was a racket. Two of them dared a third to go into the confession box and make a bogus confession to the priest. They dared him to do it, bet him that he didn't have the nerve. But to win the bet, he did. He tried to fool the old priest, but the priest knew that what he was saying was a lie.

The priest listened to the false confession, sensed the arrogance in the man's attitude, and said, “Very well, my son. Every confession requires a penance, and this will be yours. I ask you to go into the

chapel, stand before the crucifix, look into the face of the crucified Christ and say, ‘All this you did for me, and I don’t give a damn.’”

The young man swaggered out of the confessional to his friends to claim the bet, but they insisted that before they paid him he would have to finish the performance, complete the penance. He went into the chapel, looked into the face of Christ, and began, “All this you did for me, and I . . .” “All this you did for me, and I . . .” “All this you did for me, and I . . .” He couldn’t say it. He never finished the sentence. It began for him a painful experience that changed his life and finally brought him into the priesthood. The archbishop telling the story leaned over the pulpit and said, “That young man was this man who stands before you today to preach.”

The crucifixion of Jesus, of course, matters. Anyone’s death matters. But it matters most when it matters personally, as it did in the life of the archbishop. All the Scriptures agree, whatever else there is to be said about Jesus, he was crucified, one of the millions of Jewish martyrs. He was crucified. This day, this night, remember: he was crucified by us, because of us, and for us. For you and for me.

In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris tells how Emily Dickinson was attracted to Paul’s confession of “weakness and much fear and trembling,” his knowing “nothing but Christ crucified.” She speaks in her poems of daily crucifixion, of “never-nearer Crucifixion.” “Near the end of her life,” says Ms. Norris, “she wrote in a letter: ‘When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is “acquainted with Grief,” we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own.’”

When we have traveled long enough on our journey, and our journey has taken us close enough to the harder realities of life so that life becomes precious and sacred to us, then perhaps we are ready for Good Friday. Then the news hits home in a personal way. Then we know why we gather with others today in somber surroundings to mourn and to feel the depths of gratitude the likes of which are felt only when such news sinks in, hits home – *He died for me.*