

CONFRONTING THE CROSS

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I have never been a great fan of sermon titles probably because I have heard too many sermons whose titles and themes belie a personal agenda advanced by the preacher, but tonight I choose to use one myself, in the hope that it will help you absorb and remember a profound personal experience that is offered to you in tonight's liturgy and ritual. The title I have chosen is: "Confronting the Cross."

Today we remember the most tragic and painful events in the history of our particular religious tradition. The story is familiar to almost all of us. Even those who never attend a church know at least its rudiments. Last Sunday we read the part of the story from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we have come to call Palm Sunday through the final depiction of the crucifixion and the entombment of Jesus' body. Last night we acted out in our own less than perfect interpretation of some of the events of the final evening of Jesus' life, and again tonight we have heard the story of his final agonizing hours on what we have ironically named *Good Friday*.

We have seen dramatizations of these events in various movies from Cecil B. De Mille's 1927 silent version of "The King of Kings", through its remake in 1961 starring Jeffrey Hunter. Other significant depictions include the Martin Scorsese picture, "The Last Temptation of Christ" and Mel Gibson's detailed and bloody "The Passion of the Christ". For the most part these images instill in us, to varying degrees, a sense of the reality of those momentous and tragic events.

But what does it mean for me – for each one of you – to come face to face and to really think about this object we call the cross – this instrument of torture and execution? And did it mean something different to Jesus? If one can in anyway imagine the humiliation of being stripped, the unbearable pain of lashing with a whip studded with pieces of metal, of having a wreath of thorns forced down on one's head, of the terror induced by the anticipation of having nails driven through one's body's extremities and hanging suspended in unbearable pain until one suffocates when one's bound and wounded legs can no longer hold the chest in a position where the lungs can continue to take in air.

I apologize for using such graphic language and imagery and perhaps I, like Mel Gibson, have pushed too far against the boundaries of acceptable discourse. But I think this is useful in understanding the real Jesus and in understanding the reality of an execution.

But what did crucifixion and the torture preceding it mean for Jesus? Are we to believe, as some do, that Jesus was fully aware of his divinity? For him was this just a role he was playing on a stage called earth, a role that admittedly was going to require great pain and agony, but in the end he knew that he would be returning to a blissful and comfortable existence on another plane when

this was all over? Are we to believe that this act of his was to be analogous to our having, say a root canal – painful, but after a short while everything will be all right? Had he walked the lanes of Galilee with the periodic table of elements and the principles of quantum physics in the back of his conscious mind? Did he consciously remember that he had stood beside his Father God at the creation of the world or had sat down with Him and discussed in detail the various scenes of this “holy docudrama” that he was playing?

Or was he, like any ordinary human, unsure, frightened, terrified even, of the impending agony he was to bear? Did he have the same apprehension about death that lies at the core of every human heart?

The stories that are told about Jesus in the gospels depict a human who gradually comes to realize his inner divinity – his purpose for being and his relationship to the Unknown. He was a contemplative – he often went apart into solitude to pray and meditate and struggle with that inner drive that propelled him ever more intensely to discover who he was and what he was supposed to do, and perhaps to even gain some small glimpse of what it was to mean, not just for himself, but for those he loved – his people.

Those who told his story in the days, years and decades after his crucifixion, undoubtedly saw special meaning in the events surrounding his earthly life, and interspersed those meanings back into the story, giving us perhaps a distorted picture of Jesus the man, but also creating our understanding of Jesus as the Christ – the Messiah.

But on that dismal Friday as he struggled to carry his own instrument of execution up that path to Mount Calvary – Golgotha, it seems reasonable that the intuitional feeling of hope and trust in a Father God which he had struggled to find through fasting, meditation and prayer, was almost extinguished by pain and exhaustion. His confidence in his soul’s continued existence beyond this plane might reasonably have been all but extinguished. The sheer terror of the impending real acts of physical execution might reasonably have left little room for thoughts of a divine afterlife. No! The torture was real. The crown of thorns was painful. The physical exhaustion was almost overwhelming. Terror was close to completely incapacitating him. I think this is a reasonable depiction of the events of that dreadful day.

Unfortunately, over the centuries the picture has been distorted, sanitized and even romanticized. Even the traditional ritual of the Stations of the Cross does not completely realistically confront us with the reality of the story.

In a few minutes you will be invited to come and stand before a modern rendition of this obscenely torturous instrument of Roman execution. What will you think of at that moment? Will you be trying to get your mind around theological ideas of forgiveness, redemption and divine sacrifice?

I suggest you allow yourself to be confronted by this symbol in the same way Jesus was confronted by the historically real thing. Stand there, stripped, not of your clothing, but of your ego. Lay aside all roles that you are required to play. No longer be a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, a breadwinner, a housewife, a student, a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, or any other role you normally play. Even ignore all feelings of either joy or grief. Try to strip your very being of all vestiges of self. Try to expose the real inner "I am" that is at the core of your being. Confront the cross as Jesus did, with your deepest fears of death and extermination exposed. If you can successfully do this, while retaining a basic trust in the goodness of all creation and its Creator then my friend, I believe that you will *begin* to discover the meaning of faith.