

## **SERMON 926**

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2015

990th Week as Priest

817th Week at St Dunstan's

82nd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

### **THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST**

*Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.*

It is most important as we find ourselves about to enter the Week of the Passion to understand that Jesus experienced suffering just as we do. He felt pain, and he knew grief and loss. He was truly the Son of God, the “anointed one,” who was the Messiah—but he was also fully human, as are we. Fully divine, and yet fully a man. And so he knew our human condition as one of us.

Herein lies a deep and perhaps inexplicable mystery: Why did Jesus need to suffer? Because he was God the Son, he could have chosen to avoid earthly pain. He could have decided not to feel grief or loss. He could have felt nothing, had he chosen to do so.

One of the earliest heresies of the Church was the belief that Jesus was only divine, that he merely appeared to be a human being, and that he was God only in the form or pretense of a man. In that way, he did not actually suffer. That way, he did not stoop to the lowliness of humanity, or defile himself with the smudge and smell of human nature.

But a Jesus without human suffering is not the Lord of life. The Jesus who does not feel physical or emotional suffering cannot know us for who we are. We are God's creatures, though perhaps a little lower than the angels, and we know that this existence holds both joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, life and death.

There is a compelling argument that without sorrow, we would not understand joy; without pain and loss and death, we would not appreciate the beauty and goodness of this life. I have often said before that if we did not die, we would not love one another. We could always put it off for another day. We could begin to care about others tomorrow, always tomorrow.

The life and death of Jesus of Nazareth demonstrate to us, and for us, the ultimate power of love to overcome suffering and loss. In Paul's Letter to the Philippians, he says this very thing:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

That early heresy had it wrong. They were misreading Philippians. Yes, Jesus was equal with God (in fact, he was God!), but he emptied himself (he gave up his own will, his own interest) in order to be fully human. He “took the form of a slave,” says Paul, but actually he was more than form; he was essentially and completely a man. And because he was a man, he suffered and felt pain and died as a man.

This was necessary according to the ultimate will of God. Not that I understand the ultimate will of God, or that anybody actually understands God’s will—but that we seek to understand God’s will through faith, and through a careful reading of the sacred stories, and through living a life of faith that opens our hearts and minds to the working of the Holy Spirit.

Our Gospel lesson from John holds within it a moment of the utter humanity of Jesus: “Now my soul is troubled,” he says. “And what should I say-- ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

Jesus knows, as a man, that he must make an ultimate sacrifice of himself in order to save the fallen creation and its creatures. He must make suffer as the only way to “stand in the gap” between our sins and the judgment of those sins. There must be an atonement, a ransom, a price paid—and he is willing to pay it.

God has tried to save his people throughout salvation history. He has called them into right relationship with him; he has given them a covenant; he has provided for them the Law—but none of these revelations of God, full and complete as they were, has been able to save us from our own sad selves.

No, in the fullness of time, God comes to us as one of us—in order to save us from sin and death, to save us from our own sinfulness and inexorable march to death and self-destruction. God intervenes, in the person of Jesus Christ, fully God and fully Man, and it is his suffering, his sacrifice, which is the one, perfect satisfaction and oblation for the sins of the whole world.

He suffers and we are saved. He dies and we are saved from death. He rises to new life and we are raised with him. He lives forever and we are given eternal life by him, and with him, and in him. It was the only way. It was the only way. **AMEN.**