

# WAS IT GOD'S PLAN THAT JESUS DIE A CRUEL DEATH? IF SO, WHAT IMAGE OF GOD DOES THAT LEAVE US WITH?

## Reflection for Palm Sunday, Cycle A

I will share a response to that important question later in my column. Today begins the holiest week of the year. The heart of Holy Week is of course our celebration of the *Triduum* — Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. The Triduum is not so much three separate celebrations, but rather on continuous celebration with three parts. The *unitive* nature of the three liturgies is underlined by the omission of a concluding rite on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. These two liturgies are “left hanging”, so to speak, incomplete without that which follows, as if the liturgies of Holy Thursday and Good Friday are saying to us, “*we are not done yet. To be continued.*”

Last year many people said our celebration of the Triduum was the most moving that they had ever attended. Praise God. I hope this years will also be moving and prayerful. Three priests will be available for *confessions* after the Holy Thursday and Good Friday services.

If you rarely come to the Holy Week services, I hope that you come to at least one of them this year. See page seven of this bulletin for times of services. If you usually come to the services, this year try to bring a friend or neighbor. Also, I strongly encourage parents to bring your children to the Holy Week services. How sad, if children grow up with little or no experiences of the *most important* celebrations of our entire church year.

Getting back to the important question posed at the beginning of my column.

Did our loving God demand that Jesus die a most cruel death to pay for the offense that sin caused to God? Many, if not most of us, might answer ‘yes’ to that question. Frequently, we use the ‘repayment’ or ‘retribution’ language when we speak about Christ’s death. We say “he *paid* for our sins with his death.” Even the scriptures and Catechism seem to imply that Jesus had to satisfy an angry God by his cruel death. The scriptures seem to imply that there was no way to ‘win our salvation’ except through the cruel death of God. 1Cor 15:3 states that “*Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.*” 1 Peter 1:18-19 speaks about Jesus “paying the price” for our sins. The *Catechism* states that Jesus death was no coincidence of circumstances but a part of God’s plan. So was it God’s divine plan that Jesus come down and pay for our sins with a cruel and bloody death? If so, how does that make us feel about God? Who would want to draw close to such a bloodthirsty God?

Some year ago theologian John Wijngaards (with degrees from the Gregorian University and the Pontical Institute in Rome) wrote a book called *Inheriting the Master’s Cloak*. Chapter one is titled *Escape from the Cannibal God*. In this chapter, Wijngaard speaks very well to the question of Jesus’s death and if it was God’s will. He writes:

*Mankind had sinned. God was looking for a way to redeem us from this sin, but his strict sense of justice had to be satisfied first. In other words, God could not simply forgive sins through an act of mercy; satisfaction had to be offered to his justice. God decided to solve the problem by making his own Son assume human nature and die a violent death. Through his bloody sacrifice Christ paid the price on behalf of all. Only then could God forgive sins and receive us back as his children.*

*The origins of this theology lie in the Middle Ages. The word justice—used in St. Paul’s letters—was understood in legal terms, not in the sense of “making holy” intended by Paul (see Rom 3:21-26). It misunderstood the notion of vicarious suffering expressed in Deutero-Isaiah and applied to Jesus (Is 52:13-53:12). It gave a wrong meaning to the way in which Jesus’ death is said to be the will of the Father (Mt 26:36-43) and misrepresented what Peter said about Jesus “having paid the price” (1 Pt 1:18-19). It is not difficult to see how all these texts, if not properly understood, could lead to the theory mentioned above.*

### **Grace and Free Gift**

*The theological construction above is wrong, first of all, because the idea of human sacrifice giving God satisfaction*

goes contrary to what scripture teaches about God. “Such an idea never entered my mind!” we read in Jeremiah three times. How could we expect God the Father to do to his beloved Son what he abhorred in the parents of Israel? Secondly, redemption would become a deal instead of being a free act of mercy. The point of the salvation brought through Jesus is precisely that it is a free gift of God the Father, not based on wages of any sort. Thirdly, if Jesus’ death on Calvary were the price which he paid to satisfy his Father’s justice, why was his resurrection equally important for redemption? If Jesus’ death were the sacrifice that satisfied his Father’s anger, we would have been saved also without the resurrection. Yet without the resurrection, St. Paul tells us, “your faith is a delusion and you are still lost in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17).

How then should redemption be understood? Jesus, the only-begotten Son, the Word of God, became a human being. He brought us grace and truth, because no one had ever seen God, but he had. He made the Father known. And to those who believed in him, he gave the right to become God’s children. From an analysis of John 1:1-198 it is clear that Jesus saved us by a gift of his life. He saved us by becoming man and by extending his own life to those who joined him in faith. A similar picture emerges from reading that other summary of Jesus’ salvific function in the high-priestly prayer of John 17.

### **Not My Will But Yours Be Done**

What then about Jesus’ death and resurrection? Jesus’ crucifixion was a crime. Jesus calls it a sin and repeatedly protests his innocence. In that sense it was not willed by God and could not be willed. But for Jesus to be true to his mission, he had to stand by his disciples to the end. He was not like the hired shepherd who runs away in the face of danger. He was ready to die for his sheep. This readiness of Jesus to die was pleasing to his Father; in that sense it was the Father’s will.

**“The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again”**  
(Jn 10:17)

Jesus’ death, which resulted from hatred and sin, became, in fact, the highest expression of his human love. The greatest love a person can show is to give up life itself for another. That is why God chose it to become the turning point in Jesus’ redemptive life. Just as the Passover sacrifice marked the Exodus and the old covenant, so Jesus’ death was seen as the sacrifice marking our exodus from sin and the conclusion of the new covenant. Jesus’ resurrection inaugurated our new existence under direction of the Spirit (Jn 14:15-31).

The song of the “suffering servant,” Is 52:13—53:12, which was so important for Jesus and the early church in explaining his death and resurrection, confirms this interpretation. An innocent man is condemned to death. He suffers terribly. But he is a special person because he lives and prays for others. That is why God decides to use this suffering to bring forgiveness:

**“It was my will that he should suffer;  
his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness...  
After a life of suffering he will again have joy;  
he will know that he did not suffer in vain....  
He willingly gave his life  
and shared the fate of evil men.  
He took the place of many sinners  
and prayed that they might be forgiven”**  
(Is 53:10, 11, 12)

**But Jesus’ suffering was preordained by God, you may object. Isaiah 53:10 states: “It was my will that he should suffer!” And in Gethsemane Jesus clearly accepts suffering and death only because it is his Father’s will. Thus the Father wanted Jesus to die in order to make his death the sacrifice for all.**

**Yes, it was the Father’s will, and yet, it wasn’t! How is this explained? It was not the Father’s will in the sense that he wanted that death itself. As something determined by his absolute will. As we have seen, he could not want it like that because it involved a sin. And God cannot contradict himself by wanting an evil thing. But when the option of**

*death faced Jesus as a consequence of being faithful to his mission, then the Father wanted it. Because he wanted Jesus to be faithful.*

*Suppose a young man joins the army. He attains the rank of lieutenant. War breaks out. He hears that he may be sent to the front line in the near future. In those circumstances he writes his father this letter:*

*"Dear Dad: When I left home both you and Mother asked me to look after myself and not to risk my life without need. I know they will ask for volunteers from among the officers to lead the next infantry attack. I feel it may be my duty to volunteer, even though it will expose me to enemy fire. What do you want me to do? Should I die for my country?"*

*I imagine that the father would send this reply:*

*"My Dear Son: You know that your mother and I love you dearly. Every day we pray for your safe return. Nothing would shock and sadden us more than losing you. But if your duty, if the freedom of our country requires it, we want you not to be afraid. Dying with a good conscience is better than living as a coward. We want you to be faithful to your task, even if it means death."*

*This is exactly what the scriptural texts are saying about the Father and Jesus. "I am the good shepherd... The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life" (Jn 10:11, 17).*

*Jesus saved us by his whole life. His rising to life is just as important as his dying; we share in both. Jesus' entire life expressed his self-gift of emptying and obedience. The letter to the Hebrews explains how Jesus is our new high priest. The sacrifice he offered on our behalf was "Here I am to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:7). The gift of himself, resulting in his death, became the supreme sacrifice of reconciliation that fulfilled and replaced all other sacrifices.*

*So God does away with all the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place. Because Jesus*

*Christ did what God wanted him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that he made of his own body once for all. (Heb 10:9-10).*

*It is obvious that, once we have the fundamental picture right, we may then speak of Jesus' meriting redemption for us, of "paying the price with his blood," and so on. But such expressions are only valid if they presuppose the biblical teaching that Jesus saved us through his whole life and that his death was the culmination of his gift of self.*

### **Praying at the Foot of the Cross**

**All of us would be well this week to spend some time praying with a crucifix.**

**The following meditation was written by Fr. Vima Dasan, S.J.**

*Lord, I MARVEL at you. You are incomparable. In infancy you startled a king; in boyhood you puzzled the learned doctors; in manhood you walked upon the waves and hushed the sea to sleep; and finally you hung upon the cross and removed the sting of death. Great men have come and gone but you live on. Herod could not kill you, Satan could not seduce you, death could not destroy you and the grave could not hold you. You are incredible. You never wrote a book but more books have been written on you than on anyone else. You never wrote a song but you*

*provided a theme for the best musicians in the world. You never practiced medicine but you have healed more broken hearts than any other physician. All this by your death on the cross. Like the flower that blooms and in blooming it dies, like the pelican in the mediaeval legends that feeds its young ones with its blood and in feeding it dies, you died giving life.*

*Lord, I THANK YOU. I thank you for the poverty, the pains and the passion you suffered for me. You slept in a manger that was not your own, you cruised on the lake in a boat that was not your own and were buried in a tomb that was not your own. You are the maker of the universe and yet you were made a curse on the cross. Your holy fingers made the meadows, yet they grew the thorns that crowned your head. You made the forests, yet they gave the tree upon which you hung. You made the sky, but it darkened over your head when you died. It was for love of me that you suffered all these. I can see upon the cross inscribed in shining letters: "God is Love". Yes, your love is so great, so vast and so mighty that I may count the leaves of the forest trees or the sparkling drops of dew at sunrise, but never can I tell the depth of your love. That is why it has lasted longest and stood the hardest test. I was born in my mother's pain and I will not perish in my own, because you love me.*

*Lord, I am SORRY. Evil men put you to death but that dark evil sleeps in me as well. Like the crowd that was jubilant singing "Hosanna", but soon turned into an angry mob shouting "Crucify him", I too have praised you with songs and pained you with sins. I have often twisted you with the fickleness of my human nature that cannot be consistent for two days in a row. It was the Judas in me that betrayed my commitments to you. Like Pilate who blew hot and cold in the same breath declaring you innocent but condemning you to death. I too have been a bundle of contradictions, believing one thing and practising another. Like St. Peter, I have been weak and cowardly. As he wept I want to weep: indeed, there are many tears in my heart but they never reach my eyes. Like the soldiers who crucified you on the excuse that they were simply carrying out orders. I too have been good at blaming others for my faults and, in doing so, I have only made them the worse. Lord, give me true repentance. I cannot repent too soon because I do not know how soon it would be too late. I know I am a sinner, but do not know how great; you alone know, for you died for my sins.*

*Lord, I PRAY. You have often pierced my mind with the arrows of your words; now pierce my heart with the arrows of your love. Let my love for you be selflessness: whenever I loved you right I was virtuous but whenever I loved you wrong, I sinned. Mend me, a bruised reed, so that this poor reed is tuned for you. Enter into my life more deeply; my life will be filled with meaning only when you enter into it. Hold me fast as I journey in faith. As I can't let go of the rope while I climb a mountain, so I can't let go of your hand as I climb the everlasting hills. You did not come to explain away suffering or remove it but you came to fill it with your presence, so that the streams of my life become snow-white, when they clash against the rocks. Be with me, therefore, when I suffer. I have heard you whispering in my pleasures but even when you shout in my pains. I have failed to hear you. Sharpen the ears of my heart so that I may hear you saying, "I am with you", and open the eyes of my soul, that I may see the Easter morning that lies just beyond Calvary.*