

HOMILY

Good Friday *The Celebration of the Lord's Passion*



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The Cross...it struck fear in the hearts of the world!

According to Roman custom, the penalty of crucifixion was always preceded by scourging. After this preliminary punishment, the condemned person had to carry the cross—or at least the traverse beam of it—to the place of execution, exposed to the insults and jibes of the people. On arrival at the place of execution, the cross was uplifted. Soon the sufferer, entirely naked, was bound to it with cords. He was then fastened with four nails to the wood of the cross. Finally, a placard bearing the name of the condemned man was placed at the top of the cross.

It is well for us to reflect upon the cross. Jesus said whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. Every one of us has a cross to bear. But which one? Is ours the cross on the right, the left, or the center?

The first cross represents the *Cross of Rebellion*. Even in his death the thief is rebellious. The other Evangelists tell us that he lashed out at Jesus. He did not turn to Jesus for mercy; he went to his death an angry and bitter man. We, too, are rebels against God. What we deserve is the first cross, the Cross of Rebellion. We display our rebellion when we sin. We feel that we do not need a savior because we are doing quite well for ourselves. We feel that we can get by on our own cleverness and ingenuity. We rebel against God's mercy. We refuse to repent. Many find it impossible to admit that they have done wrong. The tragedy of this Cross of Rebellion is that this criminal is not only killed, but he refuses the eternal life which Jesus alone offers. He chose hell rather than paradise.

There was yet another thief on the opposite side of Jesus and his cross represents the *Cross of Repentance*. This criminal was just as bad as the other; he was just as deserving of punishment. Yet, at the last hour, this man gains paradise. What made the difference? It was repentance. His genuine sorrow was evident when he confessed his rebellion. We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. This was the beginning point of salvation. You see, if we do not think of ourselves as sinful people, then we do not need a savior. But the repentant thief looks to Jesus and asks for mercy and forgiveness. That is all it took.

The third cross—that of Jesus—represents the *Cross of Redemption*. This is the one cross that you and I cannot carry. There on the cross, God in Christ absorbs abuse, scorn, humiliation, pain, rejection, sin—all that is sinister so that once and for all, the powers of sin and darkness and evil no longer can have any power over us.

And so, we have three crosses—the *Cross of Rebellion*, the *Cross of Repentance*, and the *Cross of Redemption*. Which of these is the *True Cross*? Which is the greatest?

There is a story told of Helena, the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine. It is said that when she went to Jerusalem to find the True Cross, she found three crosses but did not know which Jesus laid upon. To find out, she ordered a corpse to be laid on the first one. Nothing happened. The corpse was then put on the second one. Again, nothing happened. Then she ordered it placed upon the third one and the corpse came alive. She declared that this was the True Cross, for it and it alone brings life.

And so, this very day, we come beneath the cross. I invite you to seek out His Cross. Invite you to simply reach out and touch the wood of His Cross. And that simple outreach says it all.