

Good Friday, April 19, 2019 Homily by Rev. Peter Daly  
St. Joseph's on Capitol Hill

Isaiah 52:13 --- 53:12

Ps 31 "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Hebrews 4:14-16, 5: 7-9 "A priest ... who was tested in every way."

John's Passion: 18 and 19 "Behold your mother."

"My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"

We don't know for sure what Jesus was thinking as he hung on the cross. But in two of the four accounts of his passion, in Matthew and Mark, he speaks this *cri de Coeur*, from Psalm 22. My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" It is the cry of a man who has lost everything.

Stripped of his garments, he hangs naked, physically and emotionally before the world. Mocked jeered by his own people, he is emotionally and physically abandoned except by three women and one man, who stood nearby. He is no longer the strong, the joyful, the confident, young man. The energetic preacher, The curious young boy, the physical carpenter's son.

He is now what Isaiah describes in the first reading. A man so marred in his appearance that he is beyond human semblance. A man so distorted by torture and suffering that he would startle people.

He had no stately bearing to make us look at him. He had nothing that we would find attractive. So ugly was he that he was spurned and avoided by people. A man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity.

At the end he is empty. The only thing he can say in John's gospel is, "It is finished."

We say that we are His followers, but like the first followers, we often don't pay attention to him or anything that he says.

He tells me to be a peacemaker, but I am not.

He tells me to forgive, but I don't.

He tells us to share with the poor, but we often refuse.

He tells us not to strain the gnat and swallow the camel, but we argue over trivia like liturgical details and forget the important things like loving each other.

He tells us turn the other cheek, but we frequently raise our hands to each other.

He tells us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors, but we hate.

Like his first disciples we often don't take him seriously, even though we say that we do.

From his preaching and his ministry in Galilee, we are *taught how to live*.

From his passion and death in Jerusalem, *we are taught how to die*.

The question for me is whether I will take His death lesson seriously. Any more seriously than I take His life lessons. We have a desire and tendency to want to skip over the events of Good Friday to Easter Sunday. We want to skip the suffering and death part and get to the resurrection.

But we do that at our peril. Our spiritual peril. If there is one thing for sure, that atheists and believers can agree on, is that every one of us will die. Every one of us will have our own version of the passion. We will

have our health, and youth, and looks, and social connections and pride and even our human dignity stripped away on our passage into the next life. I have experienced this passage with many people over the years. With my own father it was most intimate. I remember once, a few months before he died, I was over at my parents' house in Baltimore. Dad was dying of cancer. His body was emaciated. He had been sick for years.

It was a nice evening. I said to him, "Why don't we take a walk after dinner?" He said, "I don't like to go out in public. People turn away." Like Jesus he had become a man from who people hide their faces, spurned. A man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity. This is a passage of life that comes for us all, the passage through death. Jesus, the divine presence in human flesh, was not spared this suffering.

As the letter to the Hebrews says, he was not some remote and privileged priest. He was not unable to sympathize with us in our weakness. He was tested in every way that we are, including by death.

"Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

Even Jesus had something to learn from his suffering and death. So, do we. What do we learn? To let go. Letting go is part of life and death. I think what we learn is what so many of the saints try to teach us. We are often focused on acquiring, achieving, growing, controlling, advancing. But eventually there comes a time in life when we let go.

I'm learning that now in my 69<sup>th</sup> year. To let go. Let go of my pride and my masks. Let go of my things. Let go of my professional qualification, my status as a pastor and a priest. Let go of even respect as an elder.

*(One of the effects of the clergy scandal in the last 15 years has been that we priests have to let go of our overweening pride. Our demand for respect. One of the strongest of all our attachments is our attachment to our reputation. What people think of us. We have been stripped bare by our sins, left naked and ashamed in front of the world. We don't command the immediate respect and admiration we once did. Maybe that is a good thing. It makes us more like Him. A priesthood more conformed to Christ in his passion would be a good thing.)*

The world (i.e. the evil one) tells us that letting go is a bad thing. He tells us that we should party right up to the end. We should cling to our youth, our sexuality, our power and stuff, right up to the end. (Some people want to eliminate the need to let go by controlling the end, with assisted suicide, in what they call death with dignity. But they miss what the process of dying has to teach us.)

The hard part is that part of what the passion has to teach us in the FEELING OF ABANDONMENT. "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONNED ME?"

(Just two days ago I was with a woman I have known for years in the intensive care unit. She was a beautiful woman, always conscious of her looks. She is a very sociable person, always surrounded by many people. But now as death approaches, she is bruised and weak, hardly able to talk, isolated and alone. She now takes comfort in the fact that Jesus understands because he shared in our suffering.)

The businesses of "letting go" is what the saints and spiritual writers mean by detachment. We can be attached to so many things, even good things like cleanliness, beauty, order. Even in the monastery people can become rigid and controlling, attached to our routine, our privacy, our traditions, our customs. We also have to learn to accept that our goals may not be accomplished. We might even feel a failure, as Jesus probably did as he saw his disciples scattered and his ministry derided.

The passion teaches us that eventually we have to let go of everything and give ourselves to God. The wise person learns from the passion of Christ and starts letting go even before the final passage to death. Our comfort is that Jesus understands this because he shared the experience even more brutally than we will.

He knows the loss of everything and nearly everyone. He knows the loss of reputation and plans. He knows the feeling of abandonment and despair. He understands our situation, because he lived it.

Think of that for a moment.

God understands your situation because he has lived it. He has taken the worst that life has to dish out and he has shown us a path through it. A path of self-abandonment so we are attached to only one thing. Love. But ultimately, that is what Jesus had left, even as he hung on the cross. Love. He had his love for people, his mother and his friend, and he gives them to each other out of his love. He also had his love of his Father. Even though he may have felt abandoned, he trusted that God was still there and would take his life.

That is what we have to learn too. Having let go of the things of this world in our own dying, we will have only love. Love of each other and love of God. If at the end, if we are truly free persons, like Jesus, we will have let go of all else. In the end, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, he abandons himself to the love of the Father. "Father," he says, "Into your hands, I commend my spirit."

The passion teaches us that in the end it is just you and God.  
He teaches us to sing.

FATHER, I PUT MY LIFE IN YOUR HANDS. FATHER, I PUT MY LIFE IN YOUR HANDS.