

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Good Friday

*Good Friday*

*Cathedral of Mary Our Queen*

*March 30, 2018*

Recently a group of religious priests and sisters asked me to give a talk on atheism. It was a talk that demanded a lot of preparation, so I found myself re-reading the works of philosophers and theologians whom I had not studied for quite a while. Hard as I worked on that talk, I missed the boat. I failed to treat adequately a principal reason why many people no longer believe in God: with all the suffering in the world – the accidents, the injustices, the atrocities, the heart-rending sorrows... in the face of all that and more, many people have concluded that, if God does exist, he neither knows us, nor cares about us, nor does he have a plan for our lives. How, they ask, could a good God be in charge of a world filled with such evil? And let's be honest: sometimes when we suffer intensely and unjustly, we too may wonder if God loves us and if God really directs our lives.

Good Friday is a good day for us to deal with this problem: the very day when the Lord Jesus, the Son of God made man, experienced excruciating pain, indescribable mental anguish, and even experienced the depths of our alienation from God. Let us ask if Jesus, God's Son, was exempt from our sufferings. Did he not sum up in his sufferings not only our sinfulness but also our pain? So let us ask what we might learn from our Crucified Savior as we adore his Holy Cross and receive His true Body, broken for our salvation.

To deal with the problem of human suffering we must confront the Cross. Over the centuries, however, attempts have been made to sanitize the Cross, that is to say, to remove from the Lord's Passion its bitterness and pain. We are told that what counts is not the Cross but the Resurrection, as if the Cross were merely a prelude to the Lord's victory and not at the heart of it. Sometimes even we may think that, while the Cross was certainly painful, it was bearable because, as God's Son, Jesus knew he would 'gain the inevitable triumph.'

Yet, this does not do full justice to what today's Scripture readings teach us. They teach that Jesus is every inch the suffering servant portrayed in Isaiah: "a man of suffering ... one of those from whom people hide their faces ... spurned... the lamb led to slaughter, the sheep before the shearers ...silent ... oppressed ... condemned ...." ... crushed for the sins of others. It is to Jesus that Isaiah's prophetic word ultimately refers.

But let us not imagine that Jesus fulfilled this role as if he were merely acting. The anguish Jesus suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane was real, as he took upon himself our sinfulness and contemplated his passion and death. In John's Gospel, Jesus questions himself: "What shall I say, save me from this hour?" - And again - "Shall I not drink the cup (of suffering) which the Father has given me?" The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that "...when Christ was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears..." to his Father. Yes, Jesus was aware of his divine identity and mission, but let us not imagine he was role-playing, simply giving an impression. Truly it was our sins and sufferings he bore, out of tender love for each of us!

We read also in the Letter to the Hebrews, "Son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered." And we may say to ourselves, what did the Son of God have to learn? Yet God's Son was and is truly one of us, such that his utter trust in the will of his Father had to be deepened as he entered upon his suffering and death. For in the end, his suffering and death were not caused by those who plotted to kill him. Rather, it was to God the Father's will, to his plan of salvation that Jesus would freely surrender out of love for us. In surrendering to his Father's will, Jesus became our Savior and thus was glorified, having been given "the Name above every other name."

If Jesus, the Son of God, had to learn obedience through what he suffered, if, in his sinless human will, he had to learn how to surrender to God, ...do we imagine that we, or any other person, will be exempt? In face of that, how are we to think about God's Providential love for us? Doesn't the God of love have an obligation to keep us safe, happy, and reasonably prosperous? How can God, the God who is love, tolerate so much evil and suffering in the world that he created and found to be "very good" (Genesis)? Dear friends, Rather than thinking of God of Providential love as a

ringmaster who keeps everything going and tries to satisfy everyone's wants and needs, let us rather see God's Providential care for the human family in another way. Let us look at it through the eyes of Jesus and through the eyes of the saints. Like Jesus, the saints learned God's Providential care for them, not when everything was going their way, but rather, when they submitted to his will – some through martyrdom, some through persecution outside the Church and within the Church; some through the long dark night of spiritual deprivation. The evil they experienced was itself part of God's Providential care for them, not that God directly willed it but rather he permitted them to experience it, and for what reason? They too were to learn the obedience by consenting to sufferings they could neither choose nor could avoid. Their voluntary embrace of suffering is what opened the door for them to the true interior freedom of genuine holiness. In the end, these saints submitted to the mysterious will of God and in his will they found the peace the world cannot give. They understood God's capacity to bring greater good out of great evils. Nothing answers the challenge of atheism better than the witness of the saints!

Surely the Lord of History who washed his disciples' feet calls to us from the Cross to alleviate, as best we can, the sufferings of those around us and in his grace to create "a civilization of love" where the human dignity of each person is respected and cherished. Yet, even that noble work is carried out in the crucible of human suffering.

In the end, Good Friday is less a moment for understanding and explanation and more a moment for surrender – surrender to God's Providential love... even as we see Jesus 'not only surrender to his Father's will but to take it over with total conviction.' (Cf. M. Buckley, *What Do You Seek?* p. 120) Indeed, God's will should be to our lives what gravity is to our world – it should be the force which draws all the contradictions of our experience together, all our joys and sorrows, all our hopes and fears, even our virtues and our vices.

As we adore the Holy Cross by which the world was saved, we should have total confidence that, in the end, the total sum of human malice and chaos will yield to God's Providential love. If we accept the Cross, however it may assert itself in our lives, it will sort out for us what really matters in our short span of years, and will lead us to the conviction that Jesus will raise up on the last day. May God bless us

and keep us in his love.