

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Passion Sunday of Lent, March 29, 2015

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on the Gospel Reading for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

WHY THIS DEATH?

Of all the deaths that have occurred in human history, no death is more remembered by Christians than that of Jesus. We hear the account of his suffering and death every Passion Sunday, as we will this Sunday (Mark 14:1-15:47), and every Good Friday. We recall his death each time we pray the Eucharistic Prayer during the celebration of Mass. And of course the death of Jesus is brought to mind each time we see a crucifix.

But why do we place such emphasis on his death? How was the death of Jesus different from other deaths?

We might answer that his death was different because Jesus was an absolutely innocent man who was unjustly condemned to death.

Yet countless innocent people have lost their lives over the centuries. Innocent civilians have been slaughtered in war and disvalued as collateral damage. Unborn innocent children have been killed by abortion. And innocent people have suffered because of flaws and abuses in the justice system.

We might answer that the death of Jesus was different because the sufferings that he endured were unlike like those inflicted on any other person – the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the carrying of the cross, the piercing of his hands and feet with nails, his slow suffocation, his public humiliation and mockery.

Yet horrendous and horrific deaths are suffered by many people. In our own day people are being beheaded, crucified, buried alive, and locked in cages and burned to death by fanatical Islamic extremists. People in political prisons and forced labor camps suffer unspeakable tortures not just for two days as did Jesus but for many days and even years. We only need remember the millions brutalized and murdered in the Holocaust and in campaigns of ethnic cleansing to realize that horrific deaths are all too common.

We might answer that the death of Jesus was different because it came about because of his faithfulness to God. He refused to deny who he was as God's beloved Son.

Yet we as a Church honor many people who have been put to death because of their faithfulness to God and to his Church. We have the martyrs of the past whose feast days we celebrate and the Christian martyrs of our own day who give their lives rather than deny their Christian faith.

Yet the death of Jesus was different.

The death of Jesus was a declaration of God's love for his people. For God so loved us that "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in

appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:7-8)

The death of Jesus was absolute proof of God’s personal love and care for each of us. For the God who took on flesh and came among his people loves us in an individual and personal way. We are not simply one among billions. Each of us is the one for whom Christ died. As Saint Augustine told us, “God loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love.”

The death of Jesus was unlike all other deaths for it alone was followed by Resurrection. In return for remaining that ever-faithful Son in the face of suffering and death, the Father remained faithful to Jesus. God did not abandon Jesus to death but raised him to new life. The Resurrection of Jesus is our assurance that if we strive to be faithful to God like Jesus, then we shall also be raised like him.

Of all deaths, that of Jesus Christ is the one we most remember, celebrate, and honor. For his death changed our understanding of death and our understanding of God’s love for us. As Jesus told us, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13)

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