

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, April 9, 2017

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on one or more of the scripture readings 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 DID HE DIE?

"Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?" That question might come to mind after listening to the account of the suffering and death of the Lord (Matthew 26:14-27:66) that will be read this coming Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion.

We have heard that Passion reading every Palm Sunday and every Good Friday of our church-going lives. We have been looking at crucifixes in our homes and in our churches since we were children. We simply know and accept the fact that Jesus died on the cross. But suppose we had to answer that obvious question, "Why, why did Jesus have to die on the cross?" How might we respond?

We might say that Jesus died to open the gates of heaven that had been closed since the sin of Adam. However, that response does not paint a very merciful picture of God. It also seems to contradict the parables of Jesus. For example, in the parable of the Forgiving Father also known as the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father keeps the door wide open even after the younger son spurns his father and leaves home.

We might answer that Jesus died to save us from our sins. But what exactly does that mean? We still sin, and sin continues to hold sway in our world. We are not saved from the effects and power of sin. As St. Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans, "For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me." (Romans 7:19-20)

We might respond that Jesus died so that he might win us God's forgiveness. Yet if we believe that God's mercy and forgiveness are freely given to sinners, why would Jesus have to shed his blood before God would shed his mercy on the world. Furthermore, in his ministry Jesus offered forgiveness freely, without making demands.

We might say that Jesus died to show us that suffering is part of life, even good people suffer. Yet we did not need Jesus to illustrate that fact. All we have to do is listen to the news; all we have to do is look around our neighborhoods.

We might reply that Jesus died to teach us that if we want the glory of Easter we have to pay the price of Good Friday. However, such an explanation seems to imply that salvation is something we buy with our suffering. Salvation is a grace, not something earned by the sufferings we endure or the good works we do.

We might say that Jesus died to demonstrate that life is not fair. As much as we might like to think that good people are rewarded and evil people are punished, that is not always true. We did not need Jesus to suffer and die to teach us something we learned on the school playground.

While all those explanations are incomplete they do contain elements of truth that help us to understand the mystery of the Lord's suffering and death.

Perhaps we might say that Jesus died on the cross because he would not deny his identity as God's Beloved Son; because he refused to abandon his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God; and because his love for the Father and his love for others was even greater than his love for life.

This Sunday we are challenged to consider our answer to the question, "Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?" We are challenged to consider the mystery and meaning of the Lord's Passion and Death.

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