

In choosing a theme for today, once again I did think the common lectionary has important and timely themes, since this is indeed the “end” of the Christian year, as next Sunday (hard to believe already here) we will begin the Advent season that leads us into Christmas! So we are essentially finishing the Jesus story this morning, and you will note at top of our bulletin that Christians usually call this Christ the King Sunday, or in more modern language, “Reign of Christ” Sunday. However, I was reminded by one of our worship leaders that people love to sing Thanksgiving songs before Thanksgiving... Hmm, how to be relevant to what our *culture* is thinking about, as well as honor the *Christian* year...perhaps write a new song... Come Ye thankful people, come, Raise the song of ... Jesus dying between two criminals?!

The story of Jesus dying between two “evil doers” (as one Greek version says) seems much more fitting for Lent and Holy Week than for Thanksgiving-Christmas holiday time. Yet in truth, the Cross of Christ, the crucifixion, overshadows all of his life, yes even his birth, (as when the evil King Herod ordered the slaughter of all male babies in the region where Jesus was born). Jesus knew and confronted evil all of his life, especially in his 3 years of public ministry. And as his followers, we also hold the symbol of the Cross before us in all our ministry work. We acknowledge the reality of evil and suffering. Yet we pledge ourselves to face and transform it whenever we can; this is and perhaps more important meaning of the symbol of the Cross: that Jesus was *Victorious* in dealing with all manner of evil. The Cross can have two obvious symbolic meanings: suffering and death (exemplified by Jesus ON the cross, as in most Roman Catholic churches)... and the resurrection, the victory over evil (exemplified by an EMPTY cross, such as we have).

This paradox could also be seen in the symbol of a Crown; on the one hand a crown reminds us of the crown of thorns placed on his head before crucifixion, of soldiers mocking him and humiliating him.

But on the other hand, the Crown is indeed a symbol of kingship, of Jesus' leadership, his sovereignty, his oneness with God, as creator and ruler, not a rule of force and domination, like the kings of the world, but a rule of love and justice. Looking at the image on the front of our bulletin, the Cross and the Crown, we can think of Jesus' victory, but we can also imagine also the cross as *crucifix* with Jesus hanging on it, and imagine the crown as a *crown of thorns*.

To add paradox upon paradox, perhaps we can actually be *thankful* this Thanksgiving holiday for this gospel story of Jesus on the cross. Perhaps we can be thankful for the reality of some degree of suffering in our lives. I know it can sound trite and simplistic, but we know that challenges and hurts in life are often the catalysts for growth, growth in both *understanding* of life, and in strength to *overcome* difficulties.

I turn now to a favorite spiritual writer, Joyce Rupp, of the sisters of Notre Dame, in her book "Boundless Compassion" ...and specifically to the chapter entitled "The River of Suffering." Rupp gets the metaphor of a river from St. John of the Cross, a mystic and monk in medieval Spain. He puts it this way: *I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven, and the name of that river was Suffering. And I saw the boat which carries souls across the river, and the name of that boat was Love.* It's just a fact of life, a reality, that there is pain and suffering in every human being. There are unhealed wounds, unresolved hurts that must be acknowledged and addressed so that they do not fester. Many psychologists say that pain that is not processed often gets projected... or in other words: pain that is not transformed can be transferred. (Oh how public speakers love alliteration to make a point more memorable!) Much lashing out at the world in anger, much blaming and criticizing, is the product of unresolved hurt, unhealed wounds, suppressed and buried from earlier in one's life. So everyone

must attend to his or her inner healing work to avoid passing on debris and suffering to others.

Rupp also quotes insightful thoughts from Barbara Brown Taylor, episcopal priest and former professor of preaching at Yale Divinity School. She says: *We need a God who knows about pain . . . It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have. What Christ teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them.* When we pause to reflect upon our own experiences of suffering in this life, we can usually see that we were able to learn something and we were able to grow in some new way because of that suffering.

Given that there is an opportunity for learning and growth, we always have a choice to seek that; we have a choice how we respond. One colleague of mine was fond of saying, we have a choice to become “bitter or better.” (Got to love the alliteration; well, it is a good memory aid!) One famous person who chose to become “better” was Nelson Mandela... 26 years in prison for rebellion against the government in South Africa! Mandela made a concerted effort to find camaraderie with the other prisoners and be kind and forgiving to all, including the guards. He was acting like Jesus, forgiving his tormentors, growing in compassion for all. Nelson Mandela chose how he would respond, gaining an ultimate victory over his oppressive imprisonment. So much suffering, happens in the mind. It is the mind that too often chooses to hold a grudge, to judge, to blame, to seek revenge.

Jesus' spirit sets our minds free: free from obsessing on negative things, free from seeking revenge, free from festering anger, free for healing, free for forgiving, free to start over. Jesus achieved all these things in his life, and thus we see not only his crown of thorns, but the crown of a victorious king. We see not only the cross with

Jesus hanging on it, but also the empty cross symbolizing his resurrection, his victory over sickness and death.

Perhaps this Thanksgiving, we can be thankful that in the spirit of Christ, we do not have to hide our human frailties, our wounded bodies and spirits! How tempting it is to tell only our success stories, to boast a little perhaps. Yet giving ourselves and others permission to share some of the crosses, the crowns of thorns that we have experienced - it may be the very thing that allows compassion and love to grow. I'm not talking about in depth therapy at Thanksgiving tables... but just honesty about challenges and pitfalls... that can come occasionally with some humor, of course! Humor, and laughter make such good connections; and while suffering can transform the human spirit, surely joy can also transform. Stories of joy: of surprising new friendships, of cherished family memories, stories about beautiful moments in nature... all can bring a smile, a victory over the underlying challenges and sufferings that we all have.

This Thanksgiving, when you have a moment of quiet to reflect, remember the victorious crown of Christ *and* his crown of thorns. (Perhaps another alliteration or memory aid for us? ... that it's OK to have some "Thanksgiving thorns"... as long as we also meditate on the lovely roses!) We remember that Jesus' suffering was *Love for the world*, Forgiveness toward all, including those who tormented and hurt him. We need not shy away from moments of sadness, or sharing some of our struggles or sufferings, for we know that Love is the most powerful force in the world, and that Compassionate Love can grow, and be healing in any situation. Amen.