



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, April 17, 2011

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

Solemn Evensong

at 4pm

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

on

Zechariah 12:9-11; 13:1,7-9

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WHY JESUS' DEATH IS FITTING

I will pour out . . . a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child.

Thomas Aquinas was of the view that it was not necessary for Jesus to die in order that human beings be saved. God could have taken away our sins in any number of ways not involving the death of his Son, not even involving an Incarnation. Indeed God might just have said, "That's OK, never mind," and that would have been the end of our sin. Yet, Aquinas said, although it was not necessary, it was particularly fitting for God to choose to save us by means of the crucifixion of his Son. Here in the evening of Palm Sunday, can we see the fittingness of it, can we have any understanding of how it was appropriate for our Savior to die at our hands.

The prophet Zechariah offers what I think is the key. *When they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him.* The reason, I deem, that the crucifixion is fitting as a means of our salvation, is that, by looking upon the one who is pierced, we human beings are brought to mourn.

Consider: each human being is a sinner. This doesn't mean that we are all the time doing bad things. But it does mean that, even at our best, we are never quite doing right things. There are, for instance, some who beat their children. Others inflict on their children anger. The best of parents manage a sort of right disposition towards their children. Yet even for them—those who avoid not merely physical child abuse, but emotional abuse most every day—even for them, there remains something ineradicably self-centered. There is always something askew in human behavior.

The problem, what we habitually and continually do wrong, is we cut ourselves off from others. This is sin, the preference of isolation over communion. From the big choices, like Adam and Eve going it alone rather than living in friendship with God, or Cain, unable to be in the same world with his brother, to a million seemingly small decisions that you and I make practically every day, our kind closes itself off from neighbor and God. Jesus memorably prescribed the perfect medicine for our problem when he told us that the most important things for us to do are to love God and to love our neighbor.

For the heart of our problem is the heart. It's not as alive as it is supposed to be. It is in danger of turning from flesh to stone. This is metaphorical speech, but it's not just metaphorical. When the flesh of your heart stiffens, you are liable to a heart attack. Hard hearts are dead hearts.

But how do you fix a hard heart? It won't work just to give information: information might fix an intellectual problem (a head problem, if you will), but it won't change the heart. Simply giving people data, or laying down laws for them to follow, won't fix their hearts. This is the very deep reason why God sent his Son into the world. God could have sent us words, messages, data from the heavens, say. But instead he sent the Word made flesh.

Consider the characteristic mode of Jesus' instruction: telling parables. Parables are stories that appeal to the heart as well as the head. And their point is to change the heart. You know the one about the prodigal son? You have the son who repents, the father who runs forth to greet him with love, and the other son who sulks. If you really listen to that parable, you won't just learn something, your heart will be changed.

But above all we come to this: to the cross, to this week's story of Jesus' passion. What does it take for sinners like us to come to our senses, to turn away from our old ways, to take up the living way of love of neighbor and love of God? How can a hard heart be transformed into a heart of flesh, a heart that beats and lives by love? It happens by means of an event that pulls us up short, something that stops us in our tracks, something like shock therapy for the soul.

Just so is the cross fitting. It fits our need. Suddenly we behold what we in our sinfulness have destroyed. The most precious thing in the world: it was ours, and we lost it.

I think this is how a parent must feel (or should feel) in those tragic cases where, after a fit of rage, she suddenly sees blood on the face of her child. I didn't intend to hurt her, she would say. And without for one second excusing that behavior, can we not understand? We were doing things, going along in our customary ways, and it turned out so badly. We weren't really paying attention. Most of our focus was on ourselves.

They will look upon him, the prophet Zechariah says, and mourn, *as one mourns for an only child*, now lost, and how bitter it is. They will *weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born*. But those tears, that weeping—it is necessary. It is the sign of the softening process. When our tear-stained faces behold what our sinfulness has led to, then our hearts might start to beat again.

I hope you find those tears this holy week. Perhaps on Thursday, when feet are washed and the tender last supper is shared; perhaps on Friday, when the abused body is lifted for all eyes to see; perhaps on Saturday, when we step down into the darkness of the grave. The church puts these things before us in dramatic form, and not as simple intellectual lessons, because our problem lies a foot or so closer to the earth than our cerebral cortex. Let your eyes dampen this week. Let your heart soften. Let the salvation in Jesus become fitting for you.