

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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'WERE YOU THERE WHEN THEY CRUCIFIED MY LORD?': GOOD FRIDAY TODAY

During 'the troubles' in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a few years ago, some small children in school uniform were walking two-by-two and hand-in-hand along a street. Suddenly a car swung round a corner, a window was wound down, and a live grenade was thrown in their path. With split-second timing a passer-by threw himself flat on the grenade and smothered the explosion. At the cost, of course, of his own life!

It was a heroic deed, a deed for which those children and their families will be always grateful. Yet, as it turns out, it was probably the only good deed the man had ever done. In that community, he was known as a derelict, a 'no-hoper', an embarrassment to his family and a burden to himself. So, it could not be said that he had died just as he had always lived - thinking of others, loving others, and helping others.

But when we come to the death of Jesus, as presented in our Readings today, we affirm what they reveal. Jesus died as he had always lived, - i.e. for others. He died with love and generosity, with compassion and forgiveness in his heart.

The way he died was, in fact, the completion and fulfilment of his mission. This was a mission which may be pictured as God the Father saying to his Son, before Jesus set out on his life's work: 'Go to my people. Tell them that I love them. Show them that I love them. Gather them together and bring them back to me.'

Speaking God's love to people, showing them God's love, and living God's love in all its warmth and tenderness and strength, that is what Jesus of Nazareth was all about. That was his purpose from the start to the finish of his life on earth, a purpose summed up so succinctly in our First Reading today, '... through his wounds we are healed', the wounds of his tireless and endless self-giving in love to people like us. In his work on earth, there was no one excluded from the love which burned in his great heart. He practised no racism, no apartheid, and no discrimination. To rich and poor, powerful and powerless persons alike, he reached out with unstinting and unstoppable love.

Of particular relevance to our society and Church where so many women continue to experience

abuse, oppression, and domination from men, are the constant care, concern and support, which Jesus showed to women. In a patriarchal society where women were invisible in public life and treated as little better than slaves by their husbands, Jesus did not avoid women as the Law laid down. On the contrary, he welcomed them into his life and befriended them. Women such as Peter's mother-in-law, the woman with a twelve-year haemorrhage, the widow from Nain, the woman who was literally 'bent double quite unable to stand upright', the woman in the city who was a sinner, the Samaritan woman at the well, the sisters Martha and Mary.

Equally relevant to our society and Church is the love and loyalty shown by women to Jesus in return. A famous Irish-born Passionist, Fr Francis Clune, got it right when he would point out on every parish retreat and mission he gave, including his last: 'In the gospels, no woman betrays Jesus, no woman denies Jesus, no woman deserts Jesus.' It comes then, as no surprise that, as John the Evangelist notes in today's gospel of the Passion: 'Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala.'

On this Good Friday, when our Church community is urging us to remember with gratitude how rich and deep, how full and wide, is the love which led Jesus to his death, will we affirm that gift of love with a 'yes'? Will we do so with an unqualified 'yes', then, to the questions put to us by that well-known Afro-American spiritual:

'Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
O ___ sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Where you there when they
crucified my Lord?

'Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they nailed him to
the tree? O ___ sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Where you there when
they nailed him to the tree?

'Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? Were you there when they laid him in the
tomb? O ___ sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Where you there when
they laid him in the tomb?'

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