

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

April 10, 2009

Good Friday 2009

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have to admit that every time I read the Passion according to the Gospel of John, I cringe. It has for over a thousand years been used by the Church and by Christian Kings and rulers as justification for branding our Jewish brothers and sisters as “Christ killers” and for unjustly oppressing and persecuting them. And so I start my Good Friday sermon with a disclaimer. John’s community was composed largely of Jewish followers of Jesus who in the second century were opposed by the Pharisees. In short, it was an internal family fight within the Jewish community of the time. Every time we hear “Jews” in the Gospel, it would be more appropriate to hear “Judeans” being used. Also, as we well know, not all Judeans were opposed to Jesus; he had many followers, most of whom were Jews. Indeed, the Judeans who were complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus were the privileged class around the king and Temple who, although they disliked the Romans, found it to be in their interest to cooperate with Rome in order to maintain their positions of privilege.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is the “Suffering Servant” from second or third Isaiah written shortly before the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity almost 600 years before Jesus’ birth. The author is referring not to Jesus but to the remnant who suffered in Babylon for the sins of others – the king and the leaders who oppressed the poor and put their trust in their politics and alliances rather

than in God and God's justice. Jesus, himself from a poor family and living in an unjust society, would have understood Isaiah's perspective – indeed Jesus frequently quotes from the Book of Isaiah. Indeed, Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" fits Jesus so well because Jesus' life was one that opposed and condemned injustice and oppression of any kind.

I think a second disclaimer should be in order when we approach the cross. We cannot separate the cross from God's action in the Resurrection. They are two side of the same coin. Similarly, we cannot separate Jesus' death and Resurrection from his life and teachings. Jesus was a real human being who was falsely accused and wrongfully crucified by other real human beings for very real human reasons. He touched and brought healing to those rejected by society – the poor, the maimed and blind, the unclean and the outcasts. He gave forgiveness to those who could not afford the Temple fees thus putting their hearts to rest as being in right relationship with their Creator. Jesus associated and ate with those deemed by the religious authorities unclean because of their associations with Gentiles and Rome. That Jesus embraced these outcasts only served to remind everyone of the hypocrisy of the religious authorities who received their positions by bribing the Roman Emperor. Fear, greed, self-righteousness and using religion to maintain political power were the motives of those who took Jesus to the Cross.

When I was growing up in the fifties, I saw the same dynamic at work. Blacks were objectified, called the N-word. Segregated and treated as second class citizens, they became object of fear. Fear was often flamed into loathing. This didn't just happen. It was the result of conscious avctions and words by some in power and the conscious failure to challenge this on the part of others. It still goes on today. Some

in power seek to demonize and diminish others and others of us consciously choose to remain silent. The result is always violence.

We humans, it seems, are capable of making an idol out of anything. It is very easy to see the Cross as God's forgiving act without regard to Jesus' admonition to his disciples to pick up the cross and follow him living as he lived and thinking as he thought and taught.

We live in a time of great change that has brought great division within many religious communities, but especially within the Christian Community. Many are seeking political power to make this a "Christian Country" – as they understand that term. I would warn us all as we approach the cross that piety is empty when it relies on the certainty of forgiveness without accountability and transformation and that piety is dangerous when aligned with imperial injustice. That is as true in our times as it was in Jesus'.

Amen.