

Text: John 19:25-27
(Additional Texts: 1 Tim 5:1-8; Eph 1:3-10; Luke 2:27b-35)

 3rd Lent Midweek

Word of Comfort

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow pilgrims on the Lenten journey that we've undertaken together in order to probe the depths of the Lord's love for us through his passion and death: This evening, once again, we follow the twisting, cobblestone *Via Dolorosa*, past the jeering crowds and the weeping women, out the western gate of Jerusalem. There our eyes are assaulted with the grotesque spectacle of three men suspended on wooden crosses, pinned as it were between earth and sky, and between life and death.

Thus far we have considered the hostile mob for whom our Lord asked forgiveness, and also the thief crucified on his right, who, though he began as an enemy of Jesus, experienced a change of heart that caused him to repent and to hear words of blessed assurance: "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" Tonight, we turn our attention to a small group of watchers who are far more sympathetic to the plight of Jesus as he endures his bitter last hours.

Sitting immediately at the foot of the crosses are four Roman soldiers. They are the execution detail. Their job is to ensure that no one interferes with the sentence of death that has been decreed. Specifically, their job is to ensure that it doesn't end too soon. Truth be told, their charges are past being rescued. If someone were to take them down now, there is no chance that they could survive more than a matter of days. They've lost too much blood and their bones have been pulled all out of joint. And if that were not enough, in this day and age there are no antibiotics. Between the puncture wounds in their hands and feet and the lacerations on their backs, the resulting infections would surely kill them. But Roman justice demands that they die slowly and publicly to make a lasting impression on their conquered peoples. These guards, made hard and unfeeling by having done this many times before, are here to ensure that no friend of the victims offers any kind of relief; but especially they are here to ensure that no one does anything that might end their suffering early.

Coming away from the soldiers, there is on the ground an invisible line several yards in front of the crosses; and though it is unseen, everyone knows exactly where it is. To step over the line will bring the soldiers to instant alert, and the trespasser will be treated to the blunt end of a spear shaft and a harsh word of warning (probably in that order)—but only once. He would not soon recover from a second offense.

And right behind that line, immediately before the cross of our Lord, are four weeping women. They huddle together there for mutual support, motionless, like a rock at the edge of a stormy seashore. Around them like angry breakers the hate-filled people swirl, shaking their fists and shouting; but they remained fixed in their gloomy vigil. They are Mary, Jesus' mother; her sister (whom tradition and most Bible scholars believe to be Salome, the wife of Zebedee); Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. They are all that remain of his followers, and they do not understand the sight before them. Last night when they went to bed in the city, all was well in the world. They felt that they were on the edge of a new age. Now, just twelve hours later, their world has come completely apart. "How can this be happening?"

Like the disciples who don't want to be seen here, they fear the crowd; but their confusion and compassion, and their urge to be near him ... to help him if possible ... those

feelings are stronger than their fear. Too, they hope even now that he might use the power that they know he has to save himself and get away. They cannot understand why he permits this to go on.

And I think it would be a mistake for me to try to describe the depth of their grief and disillusionment. To stand by helplessly and watch a loved one die under torture ... it's impossible to conceive ... words simply will not do. And Mary, his mother, who gave him birth and held him in her arms and nurtured him ... she knows now the pain of which old Simeon spoke when he said, "*a sword shall pierce your soul.*" She knew this pain once before, when Joseph, her husband, companion, and soul-mate died unexpectedly. Jesus had been such a comfort to her then—but nothing could have prepared her for this.

And it must have been part of Jesus' suffering too that his mother was present to witness his crucifixion. We normally try to protect the people we love from seeing and knowing things that will hurt them—it hurts us to hurt them. But Jesus knows that even his mother needs him now not as a son, but as a Savior from sin. As hard as it is, she *must* see him in this way. It is for her good that she endures this pain. But it reveals something else of Jesus' great love that even in his own excruciating misery, his thoughts are on her, what's good for her eternal welfare, and even how she will be taken care of in the remaining years of her earthly life.

The disciple John has been following the events since Jesus' arrest rather covertly. He watched the trial before the high priest from the shadows of the outer courtyard, and he seems to have been present throughout the ordeal. Apparently, he has been hiding himself in the crowd near the cross for some time. But now he too overcomes some of his fear of being associated with Jesus, and draws closer to attend his own mother and his inconsolable aunt, Mary. I suspect that his goal is to coax them away from this hideous scene and take them to a safer place. But as he comes close and he and Mary make eye contact, she instinctively reaches out to hang on to him for support. Responding in kind, he holds her as she quakes with sobs in his arms.

Jesus has been waiting for this moment: "*Woman, behold your son!*" Naturally she looks to Jesus, her son. "*What? What do you want to say to me?*" But she sees that he is not looking at her. She follows his line of sight to John and understands at once. The message is that John is now her son. He is the one to turn to, to rely on for comfort and support. He will fill her aching, empty arms when, as any mother, she needs the touch of her child. And he will care for her and provide for her needs when by old age her body is stooped, her eyes dimmed, and her hearing dulled. Jesus means to ensure that the blessed woman chosen to give him human life is never abandoned.

To John now comes the directive, "*Here is your mother.*" It is not the last request of a dying man; it is a statement of fact. "*Mary is your mother now, John. That is how you are to see it, and how you are to treat her.*" To John is shown a disciple's duty. "*Though you ran away from me in your fear, you may not do that to her. You be her son. Treat her with honor, love, and respect. I am depending on you for this.*" And we know that following in the footsteps of Jesus, that is exactly what John did. We are told that from that very hour, John took her as his own. And we know that John was the only one of Jesus' twelve apostles to live long and die of natural causes. This ensured that he would always be there for Mary; but it also fulfills the promise attached to the fourth commandment, "*Honor your parents ... that you may live long on the face of the earth.*"

There is no question that we see in these words of Jesus from the cross a remarkable display of divine love: a love that in the midst of the greatest suffering and the most significant part of God's great plan of salvation for the entire world, pauses to attend what seems by comparison to be a relatively minor detail: the temporal needs of Mary. It sheds light on what Jesus means when he says that God is so interested in us and our welfare that even the hairs of our heads are numbered.

And yet, so many questions come to mind about these words. Jesus has several other brothers and sisters who could and certainly would take care of Mary, their mother. It's true that they are not here at the moment, but as the story unfolds, they will here be not many days in the future. And yet Jesus makes John *permanently* responsible. You've also got the awkward problem that it's probably Salome, John's own mother, who is standing right there next to Mary. What about her? Does John have two mothers now? Finally, I'm forced to ask, why do this now? Why didn't Jesus pull John aside beforehand, prior to his arrest, and say, "John, when I'm gone, I want you to take care of my mother. Treat her as your own"? Why does it have to be done here, right before the cross on which he dies?

I'd like to suggest that there's something more going on right here. Remember that we expect these last words of Jesus to be heavy with meaning. The words, "*Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing*" and "*Today you will be with me in Paradise*", go far beyond their original hearers. They have application also for us. We might expect the same thing to be going on now.

It turns out that many of the church fathers and other theologians have seen Mary as a kind of picture of the Christian church. After all it is she who was filled with the Holy Spirit and conceived and gave birth to the Son of God – and it is through the church that the Holy Spirit conceives and gives birth to the sons and daughters of God today. Though we do not use the phrase often, it's not exclusively Roman Catholic terminology to refer to "Holy Mother Church". Through the church, we are "reborn" or "adopted" into God's family, so that Jesus, the Son of God, actually becomes our brother. We share a common Father, and also, in a spiritual sense, we share a common mother.

But what I want you to see is that what's going on here is an *adoption*. It is an adoption directed by God himself: John is now the son of Mary by divine decree. And adoption is a major biblical theme—especially connected with the Passover—that just happens to be taking place at the moment Jesus speaks these words. In the city, the Passover lambs are being slaughtered and prepared to commemorate the meal eaten before the flight from Egypt. That's when the lamb's blood was placed on the doorposts so that when the Angel of Death saw it, he would pass over the home. And where there was no blood, the firstborn of man and beast was struck down.

The message behind the lamb's blood on the doorframes is *adoption*. I've mentioned this before, but it's an old shepherd's trick used in the lambing season. In the morning the shepherd will go out to inspect his flock and find orphaned lambs whose mothers died giving birth during the night. He'll also find ewes that gave birth to stillborn lambs. The shepherd would like to unite them—have the bereaved ewes adopt the orphaned lambs, but they won't do it. They do not recognize them as their own. But the good shepherd knows what to do. He bathes an orphaned lamb in the blood of a stillborn lamb—and then the ewe accepts it. It's adopted by blood of the lamb that died.

That's the message of the blood of the Passover lamb. God doesn't recognize sinful humans as his children—they are in fact the children of Satan, who in a very real sense is

dead. His children, like orphaned lambs are lost, helpless, and doomed to die for lack of nourishment. But marked with the blood of the lamb that died, that is, when the Good Shepherd bathes them in the blood of the God's Firstborn, they become acceptable and God adopts them as his own.

That is why Jesus affects this adoption of John to Mary at the cross—before the one is both the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world and the Good Shepherd who is in the process of laying down his life for the sheep. It's his blood pouring out that makes the adoption possible—and makes John *and all the disciples of Jesus* his true brothers and sisters. And when that happens, the church, represented by Mary, who is bereaved of her Firstborn, becomes our true mother. We are adopted by blood of the Lamb that died.

It is she, the church, who gives us birth in the water of holy Baptism, and she feeds us, first with the milk, and as we are able with the meat, of God's Word. And she nurtures us, raising us in the fear and love of the Lord. She remains our mother throughout our lives, always tending our spiritual needs. At the same time, as we mature, we assume the responsibilities for taking care of her. As adults in the faith, we provide for her needs, like contributing for her upkeep, keeping a roof over her head, and serving her in all her various offices and functions. And one final thing: by our adoption into the church at the cross of Jesus, we all truly become brothers and sisters not only to Christ, but also to each other. Which means that we have a special obligation to care for one another. We are one immediate family in Christ, and as Paul says, "*anyone who does not provide for ... his immediate family has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.*"

So, we see in this, the third word from the cross, an important part of our redemption. When Christ says to Mary, "*Behold your son*", he speaks also to his church, "*Behold all your children who are adopted by my blood.*" And when he says to John, "*Here is your mother*", he speaks to all of us who have been adopted of our duty to cherish, honor, and support our mother church through whom God gave us life. Through her ministry God gives birth to multitudes of his children, and through her he continues to lavish us with his forgiveness, wisdom, and all spiritual understanding; and he unites as one family under one head: the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and Holy Spirit be praise and glory forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!