

'Behold the man.' Don't become indifferent to sin

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

April 18, 2014

*Good Friday
Cathedral of St. Mary
Fargo, ND*

Through the centuries, the cross and crucifix have been adorned and embellished, made beautiful as a sign of triumph, and even of joy. But today is different. This day, above all others, we must look at the cross just as it is, without adornment, and without embellishment. And we must look especially at the One who is on that cross, the One whose word brought creation out of nothingness, the One who took flesh to become one of us: we must look at Jesus, the Son of God.

"Behold the man" - these words of Pontius Pilate startle us out of a sort of dream, and they demand that we look intently at the One who is nailed to the cross. The crucifixion of Jesus was real, the death of Jesus was real. There is a temptation to look away from the harsh reality of the death of Christ, or to soften it, to hide what really happened, but today we must look at it as it was.

"Behold the man!" - Pilate says to the crowd, "Look what you have done to this man!" But his words are prophetic, and Blessed Pope John Paul, in his reflections on the Way of the Cross, found their deeper meaning: "Look what you have done, in this man, to your God." Before this scene, St. Augustine asks the question we all ask at times: "Why was there so much suffering?" But then he answers too: "Everything he suffered was the price of our ransom." Our sins are the rough wood that he carries and that crushes him to the ground. Our sins are the executioners, the nails in his hands, the thorns in his brow, the lance in his side. Our sins are the jeers and taunts of the Pharisees and the chief priests, the mockery of the soldiers, and perhaps worst of all, the indifference of the bystanders.

All the more reason, then, to look at the cross and Jesus upon the cross with all of its reality, its starkness, and without any attempt to hide the truth. Pope Benedict said, "As we contemplate the sufferings of the Son, we see more clearly the seriousness of sin.... Before the image of the suffering Lord, evil can no longer be trivialized." This is a great tragedy of our times - the trivializing of sin, or the indifference of the bystander who watches, but doesn't care; indifference to suffering, corruption, crimes against life; in short, indifference to sin!

But it has been said that it's always darkest just before the dawn, and even though we may be indifferent and uncaring, God is not! God would not be indifferent to the plight of his children, and John tells us, "God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son." From all eternity, to the moment of our Lord's conception and his birth, and through all his life on earth, the cross has loomed as an essential part of God's plan. And when the moment came for him to complete his

work of redemption, Jesus, the Son of God, would not turn away, would not remain indifferent to our need.

John tells us explicitly that Jesus carried the cross of his own accord. His entire passion and sacrificial death was a free act, an act of love, an act of sovereignty, and as John Paul II says, an act of mercy. He is suspended between heaven and earth to restore unity between them. His hands are extended wide not only to the sinner who comes back to him, but also to the one who turns away. The vertical beam of this rough cross bridges the gap between God and man, and the horizontal beam embraces the ends of the earth. The cross in its starkness with the outstretched arms of Jesus has within it the dimensions of the whole creation, and all of history and eternity are written upon it. And Jesus nailed to that cross gathers and pays the price for every sin that has ever been or will ever be.

But then, once again showing his complete sovereignty, his mastery over all that has happened to him, Jesus says: "It is finished" - it is accomplished, I have done what I came to do, I have paid the price for you. And, John tells us, he then gave up his spirit. It was not taken from him; he handed it over as a gift, as a breath of love, a breath of mercy.

So you see, in the ordinary affairs of daily life, perhaps we can be bystanders, but on Calvary, before the unadorned reality of the cross, we are bystanders no longer. For good or ill, we all participate in what happened on the cross. If we turn away or refuse to be caught up in Christ's death, we have never faced ourselves, we have never grasped the gravity of sin, never acknowledged the love of God. But if we face the cross and the One who hangs there, we acknowledge our need for mercy, and we are embraced by the loving God, whose pierced hands sweep away all sin.

Today there is no middle ground, no room for indifference. And when it comes right down to it, the cross needs no embellishment. For the One who is upon the cross makes it beautiful, and it is the beauty of love.