

## **Palm Sunday - A**

Holy Rosary Cathedral

5 April 2020

Dear Bishop Monroe, Father Galvon, Father Lucca; Deacons Richard and Richard, and dear brothers and sisters in Christ, who are following this Liturgy in the church of your homes:

### ***Introduction***

With the Church around the world we are beginning this most solemn week of the year in the midst of great sadness for the coronavirus pandemic that is taking so many lives and inflicting untold hardship on millions of people. We are also sad because, unlike the crowds which welcomed Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we are unable – for very good reasons – to gather in our churches for the Palm Sunday celebration.

This will be a Holy Week like none other. Yet it still remains a week of grace for each of us, for the Church never stops celebrating the blessed events of Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection through which he accomplished the Redemption and set us free.

Perhaps, because of the social distancing required by the current pandemic, we will have a little more time to experience Holy Week interiorly, in our hearts and minds and souls. This year, let's take the time to accompany Jesus on his last days in which he journeyed to Calvary, so that we can later stand amazed and stupefied before Jesus' empty tomb at Easter.

## ***Jesus' Cry: Why Have You Forsaken Me?***

Of all the words of Jesus in Matthew's account of the Passion, those that strike a particular cord in these trying days are those from the Cross when he prays to his Father, citing Psalm 22:2: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). To emphasize their importance the Church puts these same words into our own mouths in the refrain from today's Responsorial Psalm.

Jesus' tormented "why?" addressed to the Father expresses the realism of the unspeakable physical and moral pain that he suffered in his humanity. "Forsaken by almost all his followers, betrayed and denied by the disciples, surrounded by people who insult him, Jesus is under the crushing weight of a mission that was to pass through humiliation and [death] (annihilation). This is why he cried out to the Father, and his suffering took up the sorrowful words of the Psalm."<sup>1</sup> They tell us that Jesus "brought the experience of extreme desolation to his prayer" and "experienced the utmost abandonment."<sup>2</sup>

### ***Our question***

But how do these words of Jesus uttered on Calvary shed light on our own questions about pain, suffering and approaching death,

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (14 September 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Francis, Homily (5 April 2020).

questions which are especially pressing today in light of so many tragic deaths and adversities caused by the COVID-19 virus?

Who of us has not, in times of trial or seemingly insurmountable difficulties, wondered why God seems to turn a deaf ear to our pleas? “Why have you forsaken/abandoned me?” (Mt 27:46). This lament arises, if not on our lips, at least in our hearts.

There are times in our lives when we cry out to God and ask him “why.” Why is this happening to me? To us? Why is my family suffering from this particular tragedy? Why are so many people dying isolated and alone because of a virus?

Not always, but certainly sometimes, silence is the only reply. Benedict XVI once described this divine silence and the pain it brings to believers. Let me cite his incisive words:

God is silent and this silence pierces the soul of the person praying, who ceaselessly calls but receives no answer. Day and night succeed one another in an unflagging quest for a word, for help that does not come, God seems so distant, so forgetful, so absent. The prayer asks to be heard, to be answered, it begs for contact, seeks a relationship that can give comfort and salvation. But if God fails to respond, the cry of help is lost in the void and loneliness becomes

unbearable.<sup>3</sup>

A major reason for our suffering is that, deep down, we are afraid that God might be indifferent to our plight. Such silence seems to mean that he does not care. Indeed, there is an emptiness, a terrible pain, when we feel that God is not accompanying us on our journey through life. “The sense of being abandoned by God is the most crucifying of all pains.”<sup>4</sup>

Again and again we ask: Why does God not intervene to rescue us from our afflictions?

### *Jesus’ experience*

Such difficult moments in our lives invite us to turn to Jesus on the Cross. What did *he* experience as a man like us in all things but sin (cf. Heb 4:15)?

Already in Gethsemane he had asked his Father to take away his cup of suffering (cf. Mt 26:39). But the Father did not heed Jesus’ cry by freeing him from his upcoming death. Rather, as St. Paul wrote, he did not spare his own Son, but handed him over for us all (cf. Rom 8:32).

This silence of God before the human suffering of his Son and of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (14 September 2011):

<sup>4</sup> Basil Cardinal Hume, *Seven Last Words* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009), 37-38.

us is not the same as indifference. On the Cross, Jesus experienced silence, and that silence marked a decisive moment in his Passion. Hanging there, he truly experienced the Father's silence: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).<sup>5</sup>

Still we must ask. "Can the heavenly Father abandon his Son? Certainly not. And yet, his love for us, sinners, brought Jesus to this point: up to experiencing the abandonment of God, his distance, because he took our sins upon himself."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Enduring God's silence***

When we hear Jesus crying out his "why?" we come to realize that, when we utter this same cry, we are in the best of company. Such a cry does not mean that our faith is weak. Nor does it mean God is indifferent. And that is a great consolation. Jesus wants us to know that there is no need for us to be afraid when affliction strikes. He says to me and to each of us: "Do not be afraid, you are not alone. I experienced all your desolation in order to be ever close to you."<sup>7</sup>

When we cry out, therefore, we must do so with the same child-like trust and abandonment which was Jesus' attitude when he prayed

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Francis, General Audience (22 May 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Francis, Homily (5 April 2020).

Psalm 22. What Matthew does not record are the concluding verses of this Psalm. After acknowledging fear, confusion and anxiety, the Psalmist then comes an awareness that God is present in his traumatic circumstances. The end of the Psalm expresses praise of God and surrender to God's will: "The generation to come will be told of the Lord, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn, the deliverance you have brought" (Ps 22:30-31). This recognition becomes the foundation for his hope that God has not abandoned him to the misery of death.

Like Jesus, our trials should lead us away from anxiety and despair. In the "why?" of Jesus there is no resentment leading to rebellion against the Father. Nor is there desperation. Rather, his cry expresses the experience of weakness, of solitude, of abandonment to the Father's will – all of which Jesus experienced for our salvation.<sup>8</sup> And he was heard.

Jesus' cry on the Cross is not, therefore, the cry of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all.<sup>9</sup> What we must hold onto is this: "In these moments of darkness, he [God] speaks through the mystery of his

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Blessed John Paul II, General Audience (30 November 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 26.

silence.”<sup>10</sup>

Today, in the trying situation we are all experiencing, God wants us to trust that whatever dark feelings may envelop us at times in our lives nothing can separate us from his love in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. Rom 8:39). Even if we fail to understand why certain things happen in our lives, we are called to trust in the “goodness and loving kindness of God” (Tit 3:4), to remain “unshakably certain that God is our Father and loves us, even when his silence remains incomprehensible.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

During this Holy Week I invite you to gaze often upon a Crucifix – in your home and thank Jesus for loving us “to the end” (cf. Jn 13:1), for by his Cross and Resurrection he has set us free.

+ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

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<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 38.