

Good Friday 2017 SML
JN 18:1-19:42

God is dead. The Lord is dead, but for John, Jesus' hour of death is the hour of victory over death.

For the first few decades of Christianity, the crucifixion of our Blessed Lord was:

- ✓ a scandal,
- ✓ a stumbling block;
- ✓ it was weak
- ✓ and it was foolish.

Everything about the Crucifixion was absolutely inconceivable:

- ✓ Inconceivable that it was an inside job: it was an apostle who betrayed the Son of God
- ✓ Inconceivable that the three most chosen, Peter, James and John, would be sleeping when the Son of God needed them most
- ✓ Inconceivable that the most important apostle, Peter, the first pope, would deny, not once, not twice, but three times that he even knew the Son of God
- ✓ Inconceivable that God's people would choose Barabbas, a hated murderer, an insurrectionist over the Son of God
- ✓ Inconceivable that the Son of God would be mocked, spit at, and scourged

- ✓ Inconceivable that he would suffer and die like a common criminal
- ✓ Inconceivable that anyone would choose to follow in this man's footsteps after what happened to him that first Good Friday
- ✓ Absolutely inconceivable that a Church could be born from and survive such an embarrassment.

But that - the Church did. The fact that the Church was born from, and survived such an absolutely inconceivable embarrassment depended on how one viewed the event. By 90 a.d., the year John's gospel was written, the crucifixion of our Blessed Lord was not a scandal. It was not a stumbling block to faith. For John and for his Church, Jesus' hour of death was the hour of victory. Last night, John's Last Supper was an absolute masterpiece. All the elements of the Last Supper:

- ✓ the wording,
- ✓ His garments,
- ✓ the towel,
- ✓ the footwashing,

all pointed to the cross. As John's Last Supper is a masterpiece; John's crucifixion is a masterpiece as well.

On Palm Sunday, I concentrated on three verses of scripture that were unique to Matthew. In a similar vein, important differences can be noticed between John's presentation of the passion and crucifixion and the presentations offered by the synoptic writers Matthew, Mark and Luke:

- ✓ In John, there was no Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus to carry his cross as there was in Matthew, Mark and Luke
- ✓ In John, there was no darkness over the whole land until mid afternoon as there was in Matthew, Mark and Luke
- ✓ In John, there was no torn veil in the Temple as there was in Matthew and Mark
- ✓ In John there was no earthquake as there was in Matthew nor an eclipse as there was in Luke
- ✓ In John, there were no centurion or bystanders confessing Jesus as the Son of God and an innocent man as there was in Matthew, Mark and Luke
- ✓ In John, at the foot of the cross stood the Blessed Mother and the Beloved Disciple, not mentioned by the other three
- ✓ In John, pierced was his side, from which flowed blood and water, not mentioned by Matthew, Mark nor Luke.

But the most important differences between John and the synoptic writers Matthew, Mark and Luke occur just prior to the

moment of death. The Synoptic writers portray a very human Jesus, a Jesus God forsaken, a Jesus very put upon. Matthew and Mark put on his lips a cry of dereliction, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”; Luke, a two-fold prayer, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” and “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Not in John. John’s Jesus began his moment of death in complete control. “Aware that everything was now finished,” (*telos*, the same words spoken at the Last Supper), in order that the scriptures might be fulfilled, Jesus initiated the moment of death with a request. “I thirst.” (In the Synoptics, the bystanders initiated by offering him wine mixed with myrrh.) Not in John, no one made a move until Jesus gave permission.

When Jesus took the wine, he said, “It is finished.” And Jesus bowed his head, and Jesus handed over his spirit. No one took it from him. Jesus decided when the hour had come, and Jesus made the conscious decision to hand over his Spirit. For John, Jesus’ hour of death is the hour of victory over death. Let the scriptures be fulfilled, “Oh death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting?” (HOS 13:14)

On Good Friday, we speak of the seven last words, seven things Our Crucified Lord spoke from the Cross:

1. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.
2. Today you will be with me in paradise.
3. Behold your son: behold your mother. ...
4. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ...
5. I thirst. ...
6. It is finished. ...
7. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

How many last words were given to death? Zero. None.

Because for us believers, death does not get the last word. I cringe every time I read an obituary that so and so “lost the battle.” When we die, we don’t lose anything because death does not get the last word. Jesus gets the last word. Seven times over does Jesus get the last word.

For the earliest Christians, the crucifixion of our Blessed Lord was a scandal, it was embarrassing, and it was a stumbling block to faith. Everything about it was absolutely inconceivable. Not for John. For John, Jesus’ hour of death is the hour of victory over death.

From the death of St. Agnes, virgin and martyr:

. . . Twelve year old girls cannot bear even their parents’ frowns and, pricked by a needle, weep as for a serious wound. Yet Agnes showed no fear of the bloodstained hands of her executioners. She stood undaunted by the heavy,

clanking chains. In the midst of tears, she shed no tears herself. You could see the fear in the eyes of the executioner, as if he were the one condemned; his right hand trembled, his face grew pale as he saw the girl's peril while she had no fear for herself.

For St. Agnes, her death was an hour of victory.

From the death of St. Paul Miki and his Companions, Martyrs:
The crosses were set in place. Father Bursar stood motionless, his eyes turned heavenward. Brother Martin gave thanks to God's goodness by singing psalms. Again and again he repeated, "Into your hands, Lord, I entrust my life." Brother Gonsalvo in a very loud voice kept saying the Our Father and Hail Mary. Paul Miki proclaimed himself a Japanese and a Jesuit. Anthony looked toward heaven and called upon the holy names, "Jesus, Mary." In these and other ways, they showed their readiness to die.

For St. Paul Miki and his Companions, their hour of death was an hour of victory.

From the death of St. Polycarp, Bishop and Martyr
Polycarp was surrounded by the material for the fire. When they tried to fasten him also with nails, he said, "Leave me as I am. The one who gives me strength to endure this fire will also give me strength to stay quite still on the fire, even without the precaution of your nails." Bound as he was, with hands behind his back, Polycarp stood like a mighty ram, chosen out for sacrifice from the great flock, a worthy victim made ready to be offered to God."

For St. Polycarp, his hour of death was an hour of victory.

From the death of St. Perpetua, Martyr:

But Perpetua, that she might experience the pain more deeply, rejoiced over her broken body and guided the shaking hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her throat. Such a woman – one before whom the unclean spirits trembled – could not have been killed, had she herself not willed it. Bravest martyrs! You were called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For St. Perpetua, her hour of death was an hour of victory.

The glorious company of Apostles, St. John the Baptist, St. Paul, St. Stephen, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Isaac Jogues, the white robed army of martyrs, for all of them, their hour of death were hours of victory.

A martyr's death is no different from death today. Death is death. Death from illness, accident, old age. Death from terrorist attacks. "Let's roll!" The famous words of United Airlines Flight 93 passenger Todd Beamer on 9/11 come quickly to mind. From where did Todd get his strength - a victor over death from the cross of Jesus Christ crucified.

God is dead. The Lord is dead, but for John, Jesus' hour of death is the hour of victory over death. Death does not have the last word. Jesus has the last word, seven times over. May our hour of death be an hour of victory as well.