

GOOD FRIDAY SERMON

21.3.08

Bible Reading: Isaiah 52: 13 – 53: 12

Today the focus is on Jesus – the cross – the enormity of his crucifixion. Many people have died cruel deaths through history, for their faith, for their political convictions, for their beliefs. There have been people who have died in the place of others. But only one man has died in your place and mine. Only one man sent by God has died for the whole world. Only one man, Jesus, the Lamb of God, can take away the sin of the world.

Calvary accomplished a task set in place in the heart of God back in the Garden of Eden when mankind chose to sin. The cross was the way back to God. ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.’

2 Corinthians 5: 19

Were you there when they crucified the Lord? Let the cross and the details of the crucifixion story remind you of how much Christ loves you.

Note: The following items were brought forward by people and placed at a large wooden cross. Bible readings accompanied each item.

Crown of thorns; whip; dice and cloak; sponge and vinegar; nails; pieces of silver; bread for communion; trays of communion glasses

A theme that we are using as a focus through our Easter services this year is ‘Stones’. Last Sunday, the day when we celebrated Palm Sunday, we heard this verse in the Psalms: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.’ *Psalm 118: 22* Jesus quoted that same verse about himself, when he spoke to the disciples, and to the religious leaders, in the days before his death. *Matthew 21: 42*

Think about stones – as they symbolise the hard places in life; your struggles, conflicts, difficulties; sin. How did you feel when stones have been flung at you in anger, disappointment, loss of hope, criticism? What about the times when you have thrown stones in judgement against others, in defensiveness, in trying to get your own way?

Have you experienced times when it seems that stones and big rocks have blocked your way? Your prayers don’t seem to make any difference. God seems distant. No matter how hard you try, your efforts don’t change a situation. Stones that you stumble over – perhaps representing misunderstanding, or neglecting to seek God’s wisdom in your plans. Stony paths can make the journey hard and gruelling. Then there are stepping stones which help you to find your way over muddy ground or through a stream.

Photo was shown on the screen of a mound of stones placed beneath a cross on the Pilgrim’s Trail in northern Spain.

Pilgrims since the 9th century have made their way across the north of Spain to the tomb of James, the apostle, who according to legend is resting in Santiago de Compostela.

On the pilgrim's trail, pilgrims bring a stone from their home area and place it at the foot of the cross which is erected on the highest part of the trail.

Note: at this point, stones were handed to the congregation, enough for one each.

Feel the stone. Hold it in your hand. Turn it over. Identify the hard places in your life. The things you want to let go of, but find it difficult to do so. It might be a burden of sin and guilt. It might be a problem that you are dealing with. It might be a relationship. It might be a testing of your faith.

As you hold the stone, listen to the story of a stone of sacrifice. The sun beat down on the prisoners standing row by row. It was July 1941 and a prisoner had just escaped from the German death camp at Auschwitz, Poland. Someone had to pay for the escape. The commandant made the men stand in the sun all day at attention, then he came to address the men.

In retaliation for the escape, the commandant declared that ten prisoners would be starved to death in a concrete bunker. The commandant walked down the line and pointed to Franciszek Gajowniczek. The prisoner cried out, 'My poor wife, my poor children. I will never see them again.'

At that moment Prisoner 16670 stepped out of the line and took off his cap. The commandant barked out, 'What does this Polish pig want?'

Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Roman Catholic priest, answered, 'I want to die in the place of this condemned prisoner. I have no family like this man. I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children.' The commandant agreed. That night, Father Kolbe and nine other prisoners were placed in the bunker of Block 13. Lying naked on the floor, they prayed and sang hymns. After two weeks, the bunker was opened and four men, including Kolbe, were still alive. They were given a lethal injection to end their life.

Later, Franciszek recalled: 'I could only thank Father Kolbe with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me – a stranger. I was saved. Is this some dream?'

After the war ended, every year on August 14, the anniversary of Kolbe's death, Franciszek would go back to Auschwitz, honouring the man who died on his behalf.

What Maximilian Kolbe did for that prisoner, Jesus has done for us. He died in our place. By dying on the cross, Jesus Christ took the penalty you and I deserve. How will we respond to this? Franciszek lived the rest of his life in gratitude for the memory of the man who saved his life, who took his place when he was condemned. He was a free man. As you hold your stone, feeling it, looking at it, think of the opportunity you have to be free of judgement, free of condemnation.

Note: people had the opportunity to come and place their stone at the foot of the cross.