

Why Did Jesus die?

*Homily for October 1, 2023
26th Sunday of Ordinary Time*

As you may know, we are participating in something called the Alpha Course at St Peter's. In this course we are discovering what is called the basic Gospel Message, known as the Kerygma. The word Kerygma means an announcement of Good News. It is the proclamation that God loves us so much that he made us in his image and he wants to share his divine life with us. It also declares how because of sin, this God like image has been tarnished, and despoiled. However, in the person of Jesus Christ, God entered into our world to restore the glory of our God like image. When we hear and respond to the Kerygma we declare that this is good news for us. While the fullness of our relationship with God will only be realized in heaven, we can even now know what it is to live in relationship with the one of whom St Paul said: "The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2.20). St Paul understood that this announcement of the Good News was meant for him personally, and so he says "God gave himself for me". St Paul also states that because of Jesus' love for me, it is no longer I who live but Jesus Christ who is living in me. To live in response to the Kerygma is to live a God empowered life.

So great was the Apostle Paul's awareness of Jesus' love, realized in his death on the Cross that in his letter to the Philippians he gives the most detailed explanation of the Good News of Jesus Death. Jesus' death, says Paul, accomplished two things. First of all it justifies us before God, and then secondly it provides the means for our sanctification.

To put it simply:

- To be justified is to be made right with God
- To be sanctified is to be made like God.

This is what the Cross means. Pope St John Paul II succinctly expressed the meaning of our justification and sanctification when he wrote:

We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures, rather we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So often we think that our identity is the sum of our weaknesses and failures or the sum of our strengths and successes. This is what is called self-justification. We try to prove ourselves, defend ourselves, and define our lives with ourselves as the reference point. But no says Pope St John Paul II. We are the sum of the Father's loves for us. This is what it means to be justified. Out of his love we come to know our true identity, our true worth. This is what it means to be made right with God. Notice the late Pope then goes on to talk about our sanctification that is to be made like God when he says we have the real capacity to become the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. The word image can also be the word Icon. To become the image of Jesus is to be a living Icon of Jesus.

So let us think some more about St Paul's teaching on justification by considering the second part of the reading from Philippians. Here Paul declares the full extent of the Love of Jesus Christ. He was in the image of God that is in his pre-incarnation state he shared fully in the Glory of the Blessed Trinity. But then, to show us the full extent of his love for us and the consequences of sin, St Paul says that he emptied himself all the way down to death on the Cross. When we think of the Cross there is of course the physical and psychological torture, but there is also the spiritual suffering when Jesus Christ takes into himself the Sin of the World. This depiction of the Crucifixion is one of the most vivid I have ever seen and so captures in art what St Paul's prose so aptly expresses.

31st July 1941 sirens rang out from cell block 14 at Auschwitz Concentration Camp. A prisoner had escaped. As a reprisal the Gestapo selected 10 men arbitrarily to die for this one escapee. In a starvation bunker. The 9th man selected was Francis (Gyiv-necheck) Gajowniczek. He cried out: "My poor wife and children they will never see me again". At that moment a small man with wire framed glasses took off his cap and walked forward. He said I am a Catholic Priest. I don't have a wife and children. I want to die instead of that man. To everyone's amazement his offer was accepted. The name of that man was Maximillian Kolbe. He was 47 years old. He was taken with the other nine to the starvation bunker. He got them praying and singing. The atmosphere in there felt like a Church. Eventually they needed the starvation bunker for other people. So on the 14th of August 1941 he was given a lethal injection of carbolic acid. 41 years later, on the 10th of October 1982 the death of Maximillian Kolbe was put in its proper perspective. There in St Peter's Square Rome in a Crowd of 150,000 people, with 26 cardinals, 300 Bishops was Francis Gajowniczek. (Gyiv-necheck). The Pope, St John Paul II described the death of St Maximillian Kolbe this way. "It was a victory like that one won by our Lord Jesus Christ because Maximillian Kolbe had died for someone else".

Francis died at the age of 93. He spent the rest of his life going around the world telling people what Maximillian Kolbe had done for him because he had died in his place. In an even more remarkable way Jesus died instead of you and instead of me.

When we come to realize the full import of this something happens to us. We experience the Resurrection in our own soul. For the Father who highly exalted the Lord Jesus imparts to us by the Holy Spirit a knowing that our lives are now defined by the fact we have been made right with God – this is justification. We celebrate we are the sum of the Father's love for us. This in turn brings us to what it means to be sanctified – to become like Jesus – that capacity to be an Icon, an image of Jesus.

Let me tell you another story from the Second World War, Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who during the war hid Christians. She, her father and sister were caught and sent to Ravensbrook Concentration Camp. Betsy and her father died there. Corrie survived and after the war she went around the world telling others about forgiveness. She was speaking in a Church in Germany at one time and after the end of her talk she recognized the man coming up to her. He was one of the cruelest guards who had treated her with contempt at Ravensbrook. She pictured him as he was then and as he came up to her, he said I was a guard at Ravensbrook. He didn't recognize her but she remembered walking naked past him. She said she felt so cold and so

angry. He said, I have become a Christian now. I know I did some very cruel things but I have now received God's forgiveness for the cruel things I did. I asked God's grace to ask one of my victims for forgiveness. Fraulein Ten Boom will you forgive me. She recalled her reaction to his request this way.

And I could not. I remembered the suffering of my dying sister through him. But I could not, I was not able, I could only hate him. And then I said, "Thank you Jesus that you have brought into my heart God's love through the Holy Spirit who was given to me. And thank you Father that your love is stronger than my hatred and un-forgiveness. That same moment I was free and I could say brother give me your hand. And I shook hands with him and I felt God's love stream through my arms. You will never touch the depth of the ocean of God's love as when you forgive your enemies. "Can you forgive" she asked, "No, and I can't either. But he can.

What did Paul say about becoming images, icons of Jesus?

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

This is the way of Jesus, this is what it means to be sanctified. But we can only cooperate with Jesus' sanctifying grace when we have received his justifying grace. This is why we prayed at the beginning of Mass these words:

O God who manifest you almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray your grace abundantly upon us.

When we know this amazing grace we will be living the Kerygma, the proclamation of the Good News where to be justified is to be made right with God and to be sanctified is to be made like God.