

The Tragedy and Comedy of the Cross

Homily for October 16-17 2021
29th Sunday Ordinary Time

One of the greatest privileges I have as a priest, is in hearing people's stories. Sometimes I am entrusted with hearing the part of the story that is most painful. What I will call the tragedy of people's lives. One of the areas that is most sacred is when people will share choices they have made, that have caused them and others such pain. Things as serious as having affairs, an abortion, a life characterized by license and living according to the flesh, that has resulted in feeling far from Jesus and also wondering and questioning if they could ever be truly forgiven. Perhaps some of you listening now might resonate with what I am say.

People can experience life in such a way that they interpret through the lens of a tragedy. This is because there has been such pain, anguish and sorrow in life choices and the consequences of those choices. To be able to truly listen to the sorrow and give permission to people to pour out their hearts, as tears form in their eyes and they are free to weep, makes this holy ground. Through the tears words like "I have never told anyone about this before", and "I feel I can trust you so as to share this secret", are common.

And this is where the privilege comes in for me. Having listened, and tried to console, I am able to identify with the tragedy of their story, but also help them to see that because of Jesus, it does not have to end with the tragedy. For our stories, when they find their place in the story of Jesus Christ never deny the tragedy; for on the Cross we see the tragedy resulting from our sin. Yet this is why we call the Gospel "Good News". We affirm both the tragedy and the comedy of the Cross. For the tragedy of Good Friday leads to the comedic finale of the Resurrection of Easter Sunday. Just to mention; in Shakespearean plays, a tragedy is a story with a sad ending and a comedy is a story with a happy ending.

For the story of the Cross – if it ended on Good Friday, it would be a tragedy. But because Good Friday is resolved by Easter Sunday, we can speak of the tragedy and the comedy of the Cross. In his First Letter to the Corinthians St Paul talks about what it would mean if the story of Jesus ended with the Cross.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ¹

This is a tragedy. But listen to what the Apostle writes in the next verse:

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (1 Co 15:17–19). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead²

Here is the comedy of the Cross.

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks about the tragedy and comedy of the Cross in once sentence. This is how he puts it:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

I now want to explore with you how this verse contains both the tragedy and comedy of the Cross.

Repeatedly in the Gospels Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. This title is taken from the Old Testament Prophetic Book Daniel. In the 7th chapter the Son of Man is described as the one to whom God the Father gives an eternal kingdom. It is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. His Jewish hearers would have known the prophecy of Daniel 7. So by referring to himself as the Son of Man he is basically saying I am the guy from Daniel 7. So here is the first part of the comedy. The Son of Man will rule a kingdom that is eternal, so different from the kingdoms of this world that rise and fall. And that while we live very much as part of the world, with all of its variables we are also part of that Kingdom where the king Jesus is steadfast and faithful.

But notice what Jesus says next, as the fulfillment of Daniel 7. I didn't come into this world to be served, but to serve. This is the second component of the comedy. It is common that those who rule, rather than serving want to be served, especially in regimes that are dictatorships. But Jesus came to serve in a particular way. To give up his life as a ransom.

What does this mean? The image of a ransom is the image of a payment that is given to set someone free, whether from slavery or prison or some kind of bondage. In the Old Testament it frequently gets used with reference to the exodus. So what does God do? He ransoms Israel from slavery to Pharaoh and leads them home to the Promised Land in the Exodus. So ransom is an Exodus image and term. So Jesus is going to ransom humanity from slavery, not from slavery to Pharaoh but from slavery to sin and death. So he's going to come as Son of Man not to lord over people but to inaugurate a new Exodus in which his kingship is going to be the opposite of Pharaoh's kingship, it's going to be a servant king.

And how is it that he is going to ransom us? By his death on the Cross. And here is the point. The Cross, which was the greatest tragedy that the world has ever seen, was the place where the greatest payment was ever made – Jesus ransomed us, and bought us so we could be restored to God. And here is the comedy embedded in the tragedy. Because Jesus was raised on Easter Sunday this affirms that he has the capital to ransom us.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (1 Co 15:20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah anticipated to tragedy and comedy of the Cross. Listen again to this verse from today's first reading:

Out of his anguish he shall see light. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Here my beloved brothers and sisters is the heart of the story. All of us are those who, like those who have shared their stories with me, are in need of ransom. And the Gospel says we don't have to be the ones who try to save and forgive ourselves. But as we turn to Jesus and say in our hearts "Jesus please save me, and help me", we discover in the midst of the tragedy of our lives the dawning of the light of the comedy.

What does this therefore mean for us? The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to continue to turn to Jesus, the one whose life can save our lives.

Since we have in Jesus a High Priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tested as we are but is without sin.

Beloved when we come to know Jesus in this way, then the tragedy of our sin is no longer foremost in our mind and heart. Rather it is the compassion and mercy of the Son of Man that allows us to discover that indeed we can approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

This is the tragedy and comedy of the Cross.