

Good Friday 2021 St. Cecilia's, Brooklyn

From the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: “ Even as many were amazed at him—so marred was his look beyond that of man, and his appearance beyond that of mortals—so shall he startle many nations. Because of him kings shall stand speechless. There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearances that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity...For those who have not been told shall see, those who have not heard shall ponder it”

And so we come to be told and to see, to hear and to ponder, on this day that is unlike any other day in the Church year, the only day on which there is no consecration of bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Christ, a day on which even those who identify with the Christian faith with only words and chatter are forced to do what they do not wish to do: to contemplate, and not to contemplate in general but to contemplate the Passion and Death of the Lord. This liturgy, so solemn and ancient and ultimately simple, with its relentless focus on the death of Jesus on the Cross, is itself a salutary event, in an age that has turned its face away from the Cross, for what it sees in the Cross is seen increasingly through eyes that have been blinded by pride, arrogance and self-seeking comfort, through eyes that see the need to save species of birds and mammals that are threatened by extinction but which are blind to the need to save the unborn, through eyes that close instinctively to that truth that is a judgment on them—but ultimately to eyes that have lost their ability to see and experience beauty.

For that is what we come to contemplate here: beauty, the beauty of God. We come here with the echo of Dostoevsky's dictum in our ears: “only beauty will save the world.” We come to contemplate the Cross as judgment on the world, the Cross as the saving act of God, the Cross as forgiveness, the Cross as redemption. But we come ultimately to contemplate the beauty of God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. If it seems strange to us to speak of beauty within the context of the Cross, it is because we are among those whose eyes have been dulled by the world in which we live, and by our willing participation in the world that denies beauty, fights against its appearance, and which makes ugliness seem like a wonderful compromise with reality.

One of my most vivid memories of my childhood is something I saw when on a visit to my Uncle Dan's house in a suburb of Washington, D.C. I cannot remember exactly how old I was, perhaps eleven or twelve. My uncle, a good



Methodist like me, was taking me on a tour of Washington. It happened to be Good Friday. We went to the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington monument, the White House, all the important places. We happened to be on the northeast side of town and my uncle ask if I wanted to see this big Catholic church quite near where we were. Sure, I replied, more out of duty than desire. The church was the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. We went into the church on that Good Friday and stood towards the back. What was going on at that particular moment was the Veneration of the Cross. I watched in absolute fascination the lines of people coming up to the crucifix held by the priest, genuflecting in adoration and then kissing the cross. What I saw mystified me and fascinated me, and awakened in me something that has never left me, in fact, something that grew within me. I realized at that moment that the crucifixion of Christ was not something to merely get through before Easter. I saw that the Cross is not a spiritual gesture by God designed to teach us how much he loved us, but rather life itself. The only term that comes to my mind to describe that experience is beauty, the unveiling, in this liturgical act, for an instant, of the face of God, the contemplation, the breaking forth of the beauty of God. And my reaction was the thrill of recognition, a thrill that shook me deeply, a response that years later brought me to the Catholic Church and to the priesthood.

Many years later I taught math and science at a Jesuit prep school in Manhattan. Every year I would give my annual Holy Week fervorino before doing chemistry or calculus that day. I talked about the importance of the Triduum, the three most solemn days of the year. When I got to Good Friday and was explaining the significance of this day, one of my students said this: "Father, tell us about the Cross, what does it mean? No one ever tells us. No one talks about the Cross. Tell us about the Cross, what does it mean?" It is at these moments that the heart of the priest breaks. What to say to this young person who grew up in a Church in which this question must be asked: What does the Cross mean? I said to the student: nothing I can say to you really can do that: but go to the Liturgy on Good Friday. There in the solemn starkness, there in the solemn singing of the Passion, there in the Veneration of the Cross, there in the ancient chants: Hagios, O Theos, holy and mighty God have mercy on us, there in the procession where the Blessed Sacrament consecrated the night before is carried in with great solemnity accompanied by one of the greatest hymns ever written: Vexilla Regis: the royal banners forward go, the Christ shines forth in mystic glow. It is there within the Liturgy that you will discover the meaning of the Cross, and you will discover it as the beauty of God, and once you see this beauty it will never leave you.

*I recognized that ultimate beauty that is the beauty of the death of the God who is life itself. And who cannot die*



I say these things with a heavy heart, for the beginnings of secularization in the 60's, 70's and '80s have advanced to the point where individualism, which often disguises itself in communitarian terms, is the given mode of existence, an age in which incivility, hatred for the past, rudeness and coarseness of every kind has become the norm of acceptable behavior. It is not an exaggeration to say that this age can be described in terms of barbarians descending upon us, determined to undermine the very bases of Western civilization—which is Judaeo-Christian civilization, flawed but rising to greatness—those who live in a post-Christian world hell bent on destruction of even the memory of truth, goodness and beauty.

But the barbarians of old who sacked Rome could claim ignorance, ignorance not only of classical civilization but also of the Gospel message that was at that time beginning to transform that civilization. The barbarians of yore at least had a personal vigor that recognized in the Christian faith however dimly something that partook of truth, and their embrace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was the basis of what became Christian civilization. From the barbarians that Pope Gregory met at the gates of Rome to the Gothic medieval cathedrals: there is a line there, a line not absolutely straight but unmistakable, clear, which points to the understanding of the Cross that medieval man had so very deeply, an understanding that understood its passion, its suffering, and also its great and awesome beauty. ↵

It is indeed today's barbarians who are the heirs to that civilization of love, however imperfect, which is the civilization for which the Cross and Resurrection of Christ are the center, the civilization that understood the primacy of the community over the individual, the civilization that understood the meaning of sacrifice, a civilization that understood that there is no justice without the justice of God: it is this civilization that today's barbarians seek to overthrow. And these barbarians do not come from the hinterlands wearing skins of animals and horns on their helmets. They come from the best places, the halls of enlightenment, those who wield much power, not only monetary and governmental power, but media power, which is the greatest power today, for it's the power to manipulate men's minds, to convince them by word and image of the nonexistence of truth, goodness and beauty, to convince them that selfishness is the only realistic basis for living one's life, that comfort and self-determination are the goals of one's life, and that giving into one's basest desires is not only the natural thing to do but is of no one's concern as long as no one is hurt, or at least, as the latest playing out of this every-unfolding debasement of public mores tells us, as long as no one who counts is hurt.



Into this scene, what can the Crucified One mean? One could in despair cry out that the crucified Christ can have no meaning for this culture of neither sense nor sensibility. But our faith tells us with absolute clarity that in this present world, the Crucified One means everything. The virulence of the attack by those who shape contemporary culture against the message of the Gospel, which is the message of turning way from sin and self, the message of judgement, but also a message of mercy and love: the virulence of the attack continues, because the crucified Christ, when He is allowed to be seen and contemplated, still has the power to amaze all who gaze upon Him: from children to students, from kings to Hollywood moguls, from post-Christian academics to post-Catholic bishops: "even as many were amazed at him, so marred was his look beyond that of man, and his appearance beyond that of mortals.

But in the contemplation of the crucified Christ there is also that revulsion, that turning away from the terrible claim that this bloodied man hanging on the cross is the truth about themselves, about ourselves, the truth about the state of the world, the truth about our future, where we are heading. The very thought that God would be stricken for our offenses, that God would strike his Son, smite Him in this terrible way for love of us, that He would be pierced for our offenses: this is deeply offensive to an age that believes that offenses can be written off by courts of law, that offences against the natural law can be written off as the radical person coming of age, that the wrongs of the historical narrative can be righted by a radical rewriting of the past. But all of this is exposed as a brave new world founded on a foolish belief that man can erase or atone for the sins of the past by legislation or denial, rather than seeing that the sins of the past and present can only be forgiven and made fruitful by the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is difficult to say these things in a culture that denies the very concept of sin in the name of freedom, by indulging in a rationalizing sentimentality that drugs our guilt.

In the so-called Dark Ages of Western history, when civilization itself seemed threatened by the constant pillaging and destruction by the barbarians of that time, it was the Church that kept and preserved and lived what was the best of the past: not merely the culture of the civilization of Greece and Rome. More importantly it was the Church that kept the light of Christ burning in the darkness of the night. And so it must be in these dark ages, which darkness has become even more dark in the more than one year of this pandemic that has imposed loneliness, lack of real human contact, and death, not merely but terribly real death but also the suppression of human culture.

Those entrusted with the preaching and teaching of the Gospel must resist mightily the temptation to give the people what they want, a Christianity without the Cross. They must preach in season and out of season the Cross of Jesus Christ and the glory of his Resurrection that alone gives truth, beauty and goodness real meaning.

This parish of Divine Mercy and specifically this church of Saint Cecilia, bestowed with such beauty that mercifully was not attacked by the iconoclasts of the 1970s and '80s, must become a light within the darkness, it must become like the monasteries that kept Christian civilization alive in the darkest times. This place must become one of the lights in the darkness of the new barbarism that masks itself as enlightened tolerance. This must become one of those places where those who ask, What is the Cross of Jesus Christ, what does it mean, may come and find the answer. This parish must become a place of living preservation, of transformation, of welcoming and real hospitality, of truth and goodness, where the Mass is celebrated with such reverence and beauty that the radiance of the Holy Sacrifice that is at the heart of the Mass shines forth and strengthens those who have faith and opens up the possibility of faith to those who seek it.