The Time of Crucifixion

April 5th, 2020

Palm/Passion Sunday

 Good Friday is only days away. It is the day we remember the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the Saviour and King who was rejected by humanity, hanged like a common criminal on a cross. Jesus was crucified around the time of Passover. Passover celebrated the Exodus, which was not just liberation and exit from Egypt, but also a time of divine protection from the ten plagues that had harrowed the land (Exodus 7-12). The last plague involved the Angel of Death passing over. To protect themselves, the Hebrews painted their doorposts with lamb’s blood. In laying down his life for the sheep, the Good Shepherd (John 10), the firstborn and the only begotten of the Father, became our paschal lamb, averting the worst plagues that humanity has had to deal with—sin and death (Romans 8:2). Most of us do not think of sin or death as plagues, but they are. They are the worst plagues that humanity has ever faced, faces now, and will face for all time. They determine a great deal of our life, our actions, our psychology, our philosophy, our spirituality.

 The cross signifies our sin. The hands that healed lepers, that lifted a disciple out of the waters of a stormy lake, that touched and revived a dead, young man—those hands were pierced with nails. The feet that walked mile after mile, day after day, to bring good news, healing and teaching—the feet that stood on the mount of transfiguration, that stood before the lonely multitudes who were being fed with bread—those feet were broken with spikes. The torso that carried within it such compassion, such drive to save, such divine breath to inspire thousands of years of faith—that torso was stabbed with a spear. The back that bore the heavy burdens of many also bore the Roman scourge and the cross. And the sacred head that spoke truth and compassion, that was silent before absurd accusations, it was scarred and bloodied with a crown of thorns. The body of Christ bore our ingratitude, our rejection of goodness, our contempt for revelation and the holiness of God.

 The cross is the ultimate expression of love. It teaches us to crucify our selfish desires (Galatians 5:24-25), to take up our crosses and follow Christ (Matthew 10:32-42), to lay down our lives for others (John 15:12-13), to look to the One who gave up everything that we might be saved and enter into his loving friendship (John 3:3-21). What was meant to symbolize the triumph of humanity over God became the sign of God’s solidarity with humanity and God’s triumph over the plagues that afflict us—all of our sorrow, all of our faithlessness, all of our sins, all of our tragedies, all of our sicknesses, all of our loneliness, all of our lostness, all of our death. As Isaiah the prophet says:

 Who has believed what we have heard?

 And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For he grew up before him like a young plant,

 and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,

 nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by others;

 a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

and as one from whom others hide their faces

 he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities

 and carried our diseases;

yet we accounted him stricken,

 struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,

 crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,

 and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;

 we have all turned to our own way,

and the Lord has laid on him

 the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,

 yet he did not open his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,

 and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,

 so he did not open his mouth.

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

 Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,

 stricken for the transgression of my people.

They made his grave with the wicked

 and his tomb with the rich,

although he had done no violence,

 and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,

 he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

 Out of his anguish he shall see light;

he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

 The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,

 and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,

 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;

because he poured out himself to death,

 and was numbered with the transgressors;

yet he bore the sin of many,

 and made intercession for the transgressor (Isaiah 53).

Through the cross, Jesus has overcome the world and the darkness. On the cross, Jesus has declared that God is love (1 John 4). And God has written that love letter in his own blood. The time of crucifixion is our time of our illumination and redemption, the time of turning darkness into light, and death into life.

 The love of God is our salvation. It cost nothing less than God Himself. Love is not heartwarming stories and sentimental messages. Love is not wishful thinking. Love is not blindness. Love is sacrifice. Although I cannot verify the report, a good friend of mine sent me the following narrative from Italy:

*A doctor in Lombardy: "In my darkest nightmare, I never thought I would see and experience this thing that has been happening here in our hospital for three weeks. This horror grew every day, became unmanageable and we became ineffective. At first, only a few people came, then a hundred. .and now we are no longer doctors but selectors ... we have to decide who lives and who dies by sending them home even if these people have honestly paid taxes in Italy. Two weeks ago now, my colleagues and I were atheists. It was the norm to believe in science. And science eliminates the presence of God. I always laughed at my parents because they went to church. Nine days ago, a 75-year-old pastor came to our home with serious breathing problems. He had a Bible and he read passages to the dying every day holding their hands. We were both mentally and physically exhausted and bitter, but when we had time, we sat down and listened. Now we have to admit it; as humans, we have reached our limits, there is nothing we can do! More and more people are dying every day. We are exhausted, two of our companions are dead and the others are barely standing. We have realized that the scientific knowledge of man is limited and we need God! We started praying whenever we had a few minutes. Incredible but anchored atheist[s], we came to God and we found peace! It helps us to persevere so that we can take care of the patients. Yesterday, the 75-year-old shepherd died like never before (although we have had 120 deaths in the past three weeks), we were all devastated. Because the old shepherd, while he was with us, managed to bring peace among us that I never had any hope of finding. The shepherd went to the Lord, and we will follow soon. I haven't been home for six days, I don't know when I last ate, and I realized until now how useless I was on this earth. I would like to offer my help to others until my last breath. I am happy to find God and I want to serve him by helping my fellow men until my last breath.*

 “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:3).

 Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us, sinners.

Benediction

Beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on some who are wavering. Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.

(Jude)