



Things to Ponder

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A Death Revisited (A Special Message for Holy Week)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Today's Gospel (Matthew 27:11-54) recounts the crucifixion and death of Our Lord. Crucifixion was such a common form of capital punishment that the Gospel accounts don't even describe it, beyond mentioning the hammering of the nails into His hands and feet. But we would do well to realize what happened to Our Lord as He hung on the Cross.

What killed Our Lord was not the loss of blood or the excruciating pain of the nails. These are mere incidentals. Death comes from a very slow asphyxiation. With arms outstretched, the entire weight of His body constricted the muscles of His chest and diaphragm, making it progressively more difficult and more painful to raise and expand the rib cage in order to fill His lungs with air. Many crucifixes depict Jesus' feet nailed on a little ledge projecting from the bottom of the cross. That would have been a blessing, because it would have given Jesus a base against which He could push His body upward, relieving the strain against His arms and chest, allowing Him to breathe more easily. But there was no such ledge. In striving to push Himself up to relieve the pressure on His chest meant that He had to push against the nail through His feet, cutting deeper and deeper into the bones and tendons of His feet. In doing so, He would scrape His back, already severely lacerated by scourging, up and down against the very rough wood of the cross. After three hours, Jesus was too weak to struggle to lift His weight. Completely exhausted, He lets His full weight dangle from the wrist bones, and, no longer able to expand His chest so as to breathe, He suffocates.

This is what the bystanders, so few in number, saw from the foot of the Cross. But what did Jesus see? He saw the immensity and horror of sin. He saw our inability to free ourselves from sinful habits. He saw us giving into sin as if sin were truly part of human nature. He saw every single sin ever committed up to that point, and He foresaw every sin that would ever be committed. Yours and mine. We were there when they crucified Our Lord. We were there because He saw us.

The wounds of Jesus' flesh are only pale reflections of the wounds of His spirit. To take on all the consequences of our sins is what really smothered Him. His utter selflessness becomes apparent when we realize that because He Himself was without sin, He had nothing at all to gain from our liberation from sin. There was nothing in it for Him. He did it for us, just for us. His death saves us from sin and death because Jesus sees the full horror of sin, all the pain, darkness, humiliation, imprisonment and death that sin is capable of, and takes it all on Himself.

That's what draws us together this Palm Sunday. We all heard the same words and pictured

the same death in our minds. But what do we see with our hearts? Can we see ourselves today through the eyes of Jesus as He looks at us again from the Cross? Can we see the utter, unspeakable horror of sin, even those we consider minor? Can we entrust ourselves to the power of Christ's redemption, and claim it as His gift to us? Can we resolve to strive our hardest to avoid even the most minor, let alone the most mortal, of the sins that He took upon Himself? Can we see ourselves, as we approach the altar for Holy Communion, through his eyes? He saw us from the Cross. He sees us here today. Only to the extent that we can see ourselves through His eyes, and begin to share His horror of sin, can we too understand the two-fold mystery of His love for us: that He loves us to death--what we celebrate today, and what we celebrate a week from today on Easter Sunday, that He loves us to eternal life.

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