

Good Friday, 2018
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

The young man had been living with HIV for several years. When he told his family that he was sick, they disowned him, saying that his illness was the result of his 'sinful lifestyle.'

So he turned to his church community to find companions with whom he could make the arduous journey with AIDS. Several of us reached out to his family, but they often hung up on us.

During his last hospitalization, the hospice nurse pulled me aside and said, "He wants to see his mother."

After several unsuccessful phone calls, I wrote to his mother and dropped the note in the mail. The message was simple: "There is not much time. He wants to see you." I included his room number at the hospital.

Two days before he died, I was in his hospital room anointing him one final time. We were praying together, but even that was a challenge for him. HIV had ravaged him. The skin cancers had disfigured his body. This former wrestler now weighed less than 85 pounds. He was 26 years old.

As we were praying, there was movement near the door. It was his mother. They had not seen each other in over two years.

She looked at the shriveled, suffering man in the bed, and I could tell – *she thought she had the wrong room*. She didn't recognize him. She backed away and apologized.

And that's when he said, "Mom, look what's happened to your boy."

A shock of recognition came across her face. She could see it was him. And she said, "I see. Look what's happened to my son."

They *saw* each other.

She could not change what was happening. She could not heal him or protect him from pain and death. But she was there. And he was there. And they saw.

As we listen to John's Gospel on this Good Friday, there are so many moments of power and

poignancy. It's hard to comprehend what's happening.

How can we comprehend what is happening, as Judas leads the thugs through the darkened valley to arrest Jesus. Jesus could see their torches as they came his way. Why didn't he just turn, and get lost among the crowds on the Mount of Olives?

How can we comprehend the religious authorities, hell bent on making sure that this trouble maker would die so that 'the people' could just get along with the Romans? A death here, a death there... why worry about that when we have religious and political power to hold on to?

How can we comprehend Pilate, who seems desperate to declare Christ's innocence? It seems he doesn't want to deal with this! He was supposed to be the strong representative of the world's strongest nation. Why does he seem so weak, so afraid of the taunting crowd?

There's Peter with his denial, the apostles and their fearful flight from the scene, the dice-throwing soldiers. So many powerful and poignant moments in the passion.

And in the midst of it all, John includes three short verses.

As Jesus' blood flows over the wood of the cross, John says that Jesus *looks*. He *sees*. There, at the foot of the cross he sees some of the faithful women. He sees the disciple whom he loved. He sees... his mother.

He says, "Behold, your son." "Behold, your mother." Brief phrases, spoken as his crucified breathing became harder and harder.

Was Jesus, even in the moment of supreme weakness and suffering, still thinking of others? Was he speaking his last will and testament? Someone has to care for mom. 'You do it.' Is he teaching us that we don't need to be strong in order to still do good for others?

Was Jesus, even now, preaching to us? After all, he said that those who do the will of the father are mother and sister and brother to him. Even now, was he defining the new kinds of relationships which happen among disciples?

There are *many* things happening in these three verses. And I think something very human and very divine is happening. There he is: blood dripping down his face from that crown of thorns. Scourged. Bloody knees. Arms and legs quivering in pain.

This was her little boy, the one she had wrapped in swaddling clothes. Now, at the age of 33, her son looked broken.

Behold, your son.

This moment on Calvary reflects moments in our *own* lives. The moment in a hospital when a dying 26 year old says to the woman who doesn't recognize him, "mom, look what's happened to your boy." She responds, "I see."

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus sees, and he was seen. He looked at Mary. She looked at him.

In every person's life, there are times when we face senseless suffering. There are times when we want to fix what's gone wrong for someone else – or we want someone to fix life for us.

There are times when life throws us utterly unfair suffering, loss, pain... or at someone we love. There are times when we look up and cry out for someone to rescue us, or to show us how to save or help the one we love.

And we *can't*.

But the last loving thing we can do is to *be there*, to look, to witness. "Look what's happening." "I see."

The cross is heartbreaking. Every mother knows that watching your child suffer and die is beyond heartbreaking.

The utter cruelty of the cross. The self-transcending love of mother and son.

In that little corner of the Roman Empire, on that Friday afternoon in the Springtime, a son was dying. He saw his mother. She saw him.

In that moment, they could not change the outcome which had been brought about by sin.

But they were there. *With* each other. *For* each other. Son of God. Mother of God. There for each other. In the moment of letting go.

And in that moment, perhaps we glimpse the reason for this Friday we call "Good." In those three short verses of John's lengthy Passion narrative, perhaps we see what this ancient story has to do with you and me.

What do these three verses tell us?

They tell us that *he is present*. He *sees*. And he *loves*.

He is present, in every hospital room where a son cries out, “Mom, look what’s happened to me!” Yes, *mom* is there, and she sees. And John’s Gospel tells us that *He* is there, *Jesus* is there, and the Crucified One sees.

He is present, wherever parents hold the staggered bodies of their suffering children: the mother in a famine-blighted country, whose daughter is wailing from hunger; the Syrian Christian mother, whose son was injured in the endless violence of the middle east; the mother in the east end of Richmond, whose teenager has been shot; the west end parent whose son has overdosed, again. All of those parents may turn their eyes to heaven, crying out, “Where are you?”

And the answer comes from the One who was crucified. “I see. I’m here. With you. In your pain.”

He is present, in every cemetery where people tearfully bury their dead. He is present, in every home where children fear an abusive parent. He is present, in every place where human dignity is dismissed, where hearts are broken, where hope disappears. There, people turn their eyes to heaven, crying out, “Where are you?”

And the answer comes from the One who suffered so unjustly. “I see. I’m here. With you.”

Crucifixion was designed, ‘brilliantly,’ to humiliate and shame the victim.

Yet there he is – Mary’s Son, *God’s* Son, utterly shamed, stripped of dignity. And she is there to see it.

We need to know where God is when we are shamed and defeated.

Where is he? The Crucified One says it: “I see. I am here. With you.”

When we carry life’s crosses, our hope comes from the One who carries the cross with us. He sees. He is here.

When life leads us to the tomb, our hope comes from the One who went there first. He sees. He is here.

And when we dare to look at our world through his eyes, *we* will start to see. We will see his presence, in the young man in the hospital bed, in the hungry child, in the refugee who hides in fear, in the neighbor gripped by addiction or anger, in the family member who feels rejected, in

the person trapped in hopelessness.

Every day – not just Good Friday – someone is suffering, unjustly, inexplicably. How will they know that Christ is making the journey with them, unless we, his disciples, have the courage to walk into their rooms and say, “I see. I’m here. I love.”

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