

Good Friday 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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When I walked into his hospital room this morning, I immediately sensed that his health is failing.

His voice is weaker. He has less strength.

His wife and son were there. His son said that it has reached a point where the doctors have no effective treatment. His time is short.

We talked. We cried.

He told me how disappointed he was that he could not be here for tonight's Good Friday liturgy. He wants to be here, in his seat, with the choir.

He said, "I want to sing on Good Friday." And then, this frail, fading man did just that. He sang from his bed:

"Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom..."

He squeezed my hand. I joined in: *"Jesus remember me..."*

This was no musical performance. This was prayer sung from the heart - the prayer of a man who knows he will soon encounter this Jesus. "Remember me," he sang. "Remember him," I prayed.

One song ended, then he started another. "Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with you..." His voice became clearer as he sang, "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death..."

At the hour of *our* death.

His hour will be soon.

As I got ready to leave, he said, "Thank you for helping me prepare."

So I asked, "Are you prepared to die?"

He said, “No. I am not preparing to *die*. I am preparing to *live with God*.”

After that visit, something occurred to me. I had thought that my most important task today was to write a good homily for tonight’s liturgy. But actually, my most important task today is to *listen* to the homily that I heard from that hospital bed this morning.

This morning, I encountered a man whose hour of death may be very near. But he is convinced that Jesus will remember him. He is convinced that the Jesus who was unjustly condemned, the Jesus who was beaten, the Jesus who was crucified, the Jesus who breathed his last – *that* Jesus is with him, in *that* hospital room, in *that* bed. He *knows* that Jesus will remember him, when he breathes his last right here in Richmond.

Today, I encountered a man whose body has started to fail. He is convinced that the Jesus, whose body weakened with each passing minute on Calvary, is with him. And the woman who was standing near Jesus as he died – his mother Mary, our mother in faith – is praying for all of us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

I preach about these things all the time – *he is living* them, clinging to them, believing them, *singing them* (!), at this hour, on his own Good Friday.

He said to me: “thank you for helping me to prepare... no, I’m not preparing to die, I am preparing to *live with God*!”

Apparently, he has come to believe that death is a journey, but it is not our destination. Apparently he believes that ‘letting go of everything’ is a process, but it is not our permanent residence.

Apparently, in his hospital bed, he knows the ‘wisdom of the cross.’

I don’t know if you noticed it as the Passion was being chanted tonight, but there are three different times when John tells us the following: “It was the Preparation Day.”

+ After the soldiers had brutally whipped Jesus, Pilate brings him out for judgment. And John says, “It was the Preparation Day.”

+ the religious leaders were worried that the unsightly presence of three suffering men might ruin people’s Passover. So they went to Pilate and said: “We need them to die faster! Break their legs so that we can eat our Passover dinner in peace!” And John says, “It was the Preparation Day.”

+ As the Passion ends, they hurry and bury the body of Jesus a nearby tomb. Because “it was the

Preparation Day.”

The preparation day...

To an objective observer, Good Friday doesn't look like any kind of *preparation* for Jesus. It looks like a day of utter *failure*.

He had told his disciples to prepare for the arrival of the kingdom of God... but an obscure Roman Governor sent him to his death. Some kingdom! Some king!

He once said: “Blessed are the peacemakers: peacemakers will be called the children of God!” But there is nothing peaceful about Good Friday. This child of God breathes his last, the victim of *violence*.

He had told them that he himself was the ‘living water.’ Yet on the cross, he says, “I am thirsty.” What a failure. What a fraud.

He said he was ‘the life of the world.’ But by sunset on Good Friday, he was completely dead, sealed in a tomb.

All this, on the Preparation Day...

But... Jesus was not preparing to die... he was preparing to live at the right hand of the Father! This was the Preparation Day... but the preparation God was accomplishing had nothing to do with putting Jesus INTO the tomb – it had everything to do with preparing to bring Jesus OUT of the tomb! They will prepare his body for burial – he is preparing to throw those burial cloths aside, since a risen one needs no wrapping.

When Jesus dies on the cross, breathing forgiveness over every human sin, he is not preparing to stay there. The day of his suffering and death *is* a preparation day... leading to his eternal destiny – the presence of the Living God.

It looked like a *failure* day... but it was a *preparation* day.

What would happen if we believed that every day in our lives is a ‘preparation day?’ And no – we are not preparing to die – we are preparing to live with the God who made us!

From the cross, Jesus teaches us that we are being prepared, each day, to encounter the Living, forgiving God.

+ But some days, Lord, you send people into my life who are hard to deal with, and I have to say to you, “Lord, today I failed to love others.” And God says, “no, this is not a failure day, this is a preparation day, because I’m teaching you how to love with the heart of Jesus.”

+ Some days, Lord, people hurt me, abuse me, disrespect me, and I know you want me to forgive them, but Lord, today I failed to forgive. And God says, “no, this is not a failure day, this is a preparation day, because I’m showing you, from the cross, that forgiveness is possible.”

+ Some days, Lord, I’m just so aware of my sins, my failure to live the Gospel, how selfishness rules my life, how fear and anger hold sway over me. I feel so small today, Lord. And God says, “no, this is not a failure day. Because when I show you your sins, I’m, showing you how to leave them behind, so that you can move forward to glory.”

Every day is a preparation day. God is showing us that the point of life is not to *make* more – it’s to *give* more! It’s not to *have* more – it’s to *serve* more!

Every day, God prepares me to stand for justice, because someday I’ll meet the God who is just. God invites me to see him in the faces of the poor and the struggling, the suffering and the crying... because some day I will encounter the Risen Jesus, who struggled and suffered and cried on a day we call Good Friday.

The cross is not your final destination. Your ‘cross-carrying day’ is really a ‘preparation day.’ And wherever they put you on your burial day is not where God intends for you to spend eternity. Your burial day is another preparation day.

Just ask Jesus, whose death on the preparation day led to life every day.

Just ask our friend from the choir, who right now finds himself in a hospital bed. He is preparing – not to die, but *to live*! And with his fading breath he sings, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”