

By: Reverend John Pawlikowski

Isaiah 52: 13 – 15:12 / Hebrews 4:14 -16 5:7-9 / John 18:1-19, 42

Today's liturgy confronts us in a special way as Christian believers with the reality of the cross. Death, desolation, separation, exile, sin are all part of that reality as we learn from the readings, the music and the prevailing mood of the day.

The church calls us to strip ourselves bare for a moment, to shed the ordinary masks that so often hide the continuing presence of sin in our lives and deflect us from genuine encounter with forces of death and destruction around us. Yet a note of hope and triumph remain for us. While darkness abounds, it is not ultimately the dominate reality.

The reality that stands starkly before us on Good Friday in a way it does on no other day of the liturgical year is in the end only a rite of passage like death. This is the certainty of our Christian faith born out of the incarnation and resurrection. As difficult, as challenging as the Good Friday liturgy with its focus on the cross can be for sensitive Christians who participate in it with full intensity, in the end it strikes a positive chord.

Not so, my brothers and sisters, with some others who likewise share in our covenant faith. I speak of the Jewish community. For many of them the cross has become a symbol of alienation.

Father Edward Flannery, one of the American Catholic pioneers in Christian-Jewish reconciliation, describes this sense of Jewish apprehension in the introduction to his classic book on anti-Semitism, *The Anguish of the Jews*. The genesis of the volume, he tells us, goes back to an experience he had in the streets of New York on Christmas season while in the company of Jewish friends. They chanced upon a skyscraper with a huge illuminated cross upon it. Glancing over her shoulder, one of his friends, ordinarily well-disposed towards Christians, suddenly declared: "That cross makes me shudder. It is like an evil presence." Flannery was profoundly moved by her spontaneous reaction. He was forced to ask himself, as he says, "How did the cross, the supreme symbol of universal love, become a sign of fear, of evil for this young Jewess?"

Father Flannery's question is one we need to reflect on in a special way ourselves this Good Friday. Recent Catholic teachings, including strong statements from Pope John Paul II, have challenged every Catholic to reexamine how Jesus' profoundly Jewish doctrine of love and fundamental human respect to which he remained unalterably committed – even to the ultimate sacrifice of his life which we commemorate in this liturgy – became perverted into what has been called the "teacher of contempt." As a result of this Christian anti-Semitic teaching, millions of Jews were persecuted and even put to death at the hands of baptized people. It is a legacy we must painfully acknowledge as a Christian community.

Pop John Paul II, in a 1982 address at the Vatican, urged us to put aside this legacy of “misunderstandings, errors and insults” towards the Jewish community. There is need, he insisted, for us to overcome the past through a new emphasis on understanding, peace and mutual esteem. “The terrible persecutions suffered by the Jews in various periods of history,” he said, “have finally opened many eyes and disturbed many hearts. Thus Christians are on the right path, that of justice and brotherhood, when they seek, with respect and perseverance, to gather with their Semitic brethren around the common heritage which is a treasure to us all.”

What better time for each of us to begin this conversation, this reconciliation, than in this time of Passover from darkness to light! This is a process that must involve each one of us. It is a task not only for the church’s leadership and teachers. Christians everywhere must begin to see the cross of Good Friday as a mark of deep bonding between themselves and the Jewish people rather than as a sword of division as we have for so long a time.

This is not impossible. The prominent Lutheran theologian, Franklin Sherman, calls us to the reality of the cross as the symbol of an agonizing God. He says, “It is tragic that this symbol should have become a symbol of division between Jews and Christians, for the reality to which it points is a Jewish reality as well, the reality of suffering and martyrdom.”

John’s account of the passion which we have heard today must be integrated into the history of Jewish suffering and martyrdom. What brought Jesus to his passion and death were traditional Jewish biblical values, strongly espoused by the prophets, which were being given new force and meaning at that time by the Pharisees with whom, as the Vatican Notes on Judaism tells us, Jesus shared so much in common. So often in the Lenten season and especially during this sacred week, Christians have asked themselves who put Jesus to death. And so often they have wrongly and tragically answered, “the Jews. Even the author of the gospel just read answered this way.” Though many may have gone on to add that the Romans were responsible as well, the Jewish community of the period were still considered the concrete historical agents of his death.

My friends, that can no longer be our main question. It must be replaced with the question, “What crucified Jesus?” What crucified Jesus was domination, tyranny, power and disregard for life. Such domination, such disregard for life was always opposed by the Jewish tradition. For example, in Jesus’ time, it was the tyranny of the Romans who were in the league with certain corrupt elements of the Jewish high priestly class. These collaborating priests were despised by most of the Jews of the time. Jesus’ stance was unique in a number of crucial areas of religious teaching, but his criticism of the spiritual/political leadership of his time was shared by many of his Jewish brothers and sisters. It was the criticism which brought him to death on Calvary.

Imagine again what happened. See a picture in which Jesus stands not as an isolated prophet over against the entirety of the Jewish community of the time, but as a person within the progressive movements in Judaism. Along with the Pharisees he put himself against the Roman authorities and that small group of collaborationist Jews associated with them. The passion narrative of John, more than any of the others, makes the point quite strongly that the Romans rather than the Jews arrested Jesus, conducted his decisive trial and sentenced him to die for actions they considered “political crimes.” These were actions Jesus saw as fundamental to love and human dignity at the center of Jewish Torah – and this he never repudiated. Until we recaptured his authentic spirit of Good Friday, our yearly commemoration of it will retain the potential for anti-Semitism.

This legacy of anti-Semitism, flowing from a false theology of the cross, has been a sword striking deeply against Jews. It has struck the Christian church as well. For it has tended to cut us off from a profoundly enriching source of Jesus’ own spirituality – his Jewish roots. May those roots begin to grow in us again this Good Friday as we reflect on the martyrdom of our Jewish brother Jesus – and on the martyrdom of Jewish people throughout history.