

## Raggs' Sermon for Good Friday 2023

O God of love, we remember today all that Christ endured for us, how he was betrayed and given into the hands of violent people, how he was beaten and mocked, how he suffered crucifixion and death. Help us always to remember the lengths to which your love goes for us. Give us the power to trust in your love, to live in Christ's presence, and to hope for the glory that is to come. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Crucified One, who died that we might all have life. Amen.

One more time we have gone with Jesus to Gethsemane, to Annas and Caiaphas and Pilate. We have seen him mocked and whipped, tormented and finally killed. We have here come because we must, because such sacrifice demands our devotion, demands that we spend time in contemplation, that we allow our imaginations to fill with the appalling wonder of these events.

The God we worship is the crucified God, the God who is willing to suffer for us, to live for us and die for us. This is not a God who threatens us or intimidates us, but one who commands our attention with meekness and compassion and complete self-offering. How are we to respond?

Someone once told me that she thought celebrating the events of the Passion, rather than just skipping right to Easter, would bring one to a proper humility. To contemplate the suffering and pain we remember today is to acknowledge how much God has done for us, to recognize the magnitude of God's love for us, to accept how indebted and how lucky we are. Spending today at the foot of the cross enables us to understand the glory of Easter – and to feel our proper relationship to the One who died and rose for us. So Good Friday is about humility, ours and Christ's.

As we respond with awe and humility, we also respond with grief. Grief is something our culture runs from. We avoid contact with people who are dying, with all sorts of situations that tear at our hearts. If we do not run fast enough, grief catches up with us, and then we are encouraged to quickly take pills or find some other way to escape it.

But this is not how we are called to live. We are called to be like that collection of Marys at the foot of the cross: Jesus' own mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. They were faithful to the Lord, even here, when it threatened their lives, when it broke their hearts. They grieved for him and waited with him. That is our calling in such moments, to be there, to wait, to offer our presence and compassion, to grieve.

We recognize that the heart of God is grieved, grieved by the rejection of the people God has loved so much, grieved by all of the destruction and waywardness of God's creatures. So ought we to grieve, and wait, wait like the Marys to receive our own tasks, which may include standing by in other moments of death.

Jesus' mother is always with him in portrayals of the crucifixion. Her agony is almost beyond our imagining, but her endurance inspires us to think that we too can endure and win through to the other side of pain.

We do not know anything about the wife of Clopas, except that she too must have been remarkably brave and faithful. But what about the Magdalene? Some traditions say that this woman from Magdala is the same one who caused such offense by washing Jesus' feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and then kissing them and covering them with precious oils. The presence of the incarnation of divine love reduced her to tears: tears of repentance or of joy? Tears of awe or of sorrow? We do not know, perhaps all of these.

We do know that once Jesus had brought her healing and forgiveness, had scattered the seven demons that tormented her and so brought sense to her life, the Magdalene followed him faithfully. But

others found him a danger, an affront – so that they decided to kill this person who had brought meaning and joy to the Magdalen’s life. It was clearly dangerous – and some might say pointless – to remain openly faithful in the vicious chaos around the crucifixion. But Mary remained to cry again.

This death was so very painful, prolonged, and ugly. It seemed to obliterate all that complex of joy and order Mary had so recently found in Jesus. He had brought sense to her chaotic, tormented world – and now that sense was gone. But she could not leave. Perhaps she could do no good. Perhaps she was risking her own life. But she could not, would not leave him. She remained to face the pain and the desolation and to weep.

Sometimes that is the best and only thing we can do, accept the pain and violence and inexplicable ugliness in our world and weep for it.

When I was studying for ordination, I had a best friend named Jean. We shared all sorts of struggles and wonders, and remained close after graduation. I organized her ordination to the diaconate at the hospital for the criminally insane where she was chaplain and ministered to Charles Manson and other notorious and violent men. Then she sang the gospel at my priesting and I preached at hers. Less than three years later she died of breast cancer. She was a woman filled with humor and wit, a tiny person able to carry the love of God into the company of terrifyingly dangerous men.

At Jean’s priesting I concluded my sermon with the much-loved words of Dame Julian: “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.” And at her death, I was confronted again with the struggle to believe those words and understand their meaning in such circumstances.

I think of Jean often in times of despair, when the world seems overwhelmed with chaos and ugliness and wanton destruction. I think of Jean whose courage and humor never deserted her, and of Julian with her vision of love and promise in the midst of agony, and of Jesus hanging, abused, rejected, broken, dying, but still filled with love, and of the faithful Marys, taking it all in, looking on the results of violence and hatred, the blood and creeping death – and weeping.

Sometimes, that is all there is to do – look straight in the face of tragedy, and weep. Knowing that somehow – come rejection or terror, and all shall be well.

Come loneliness and pain, and all shall be well

Come death and desolation, and all manner of thing shall be well. Amen.