

**O SACRED HEAD, NOW WOUNDED**  
**Good Friday - April 19, 2009**

Last Sunday, the Senior High class watched Mel Gibson's powerful movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Also last Sunday, I watched a documentary about archaeological discoveries that give insight into the life, passion and death of Jesus. That word, *passion*, just kept re-appearing. Applied to Jesus' story, *passion* doesn't refer to lust or some generic strong emotion. It has its original meaning from the Latin "passio," "to suffer." The Passion of our Lord is his suffering, even to death on a cross, for our sake. If you watched the movie or the documentary, or read any number of articles or books describing what Jesus endured when he was crucified, you have some small inkling of the magnitude of that suffering - physical and spiritual. The Gospels themselves are somewhat reticent about Jesus' agony; they approach it sideways, so to speak. Oh, they bluntly report what happened: he was flogged, spat upon; derided; they crucified him; they offered drugged wine; he refused it; he thirsted; he cried out; he breathed his last; they did not break his legs to hasten his death but instead ran a spear into his side to confirm it.

But the Gospel writers do not linger there. Their focus is, "*Why* is this happening," not, "What is he going through." It's difficult to meditate on the first question without contemplating the second. Still, we needn't wallow through lurid descriptions of the physical effects of crucifixion.

We know enough; and what we know is enough to make us kneel, in humility, horror, shame, and profound gratitude, at the foot of Jesus' Cross.

I am a product of the media generation. I sometimes think there should be a sound track that properly fits this Passion narrative; some proper thematic music that articulates its meaning. Should we hear loud, clashing, dissonant chords that underscore the horror and terror of that Friday afternoon? Should there be an agitated, almost operatic intensity, full of wailing violins and somber, throbbing drums?

And somewhat to my shock, throughout the Church for centuries, this is what we hear: *O Sacred Head now wounded...* "This hymn is the Passion Chorale par excellence for many Christians. Like the Gospel narratives themselves, this hymn does not shy away from Jesus' agony, but does not linger there. It uses simple, heartfelt words and a simple, restrained melody to meditate not only on "What did our Lord go through," but "Why did he endure it?"

The words are attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order of monks in the early twelfth century. He wrote a poem in seven sections, in which a different part of Christ's body is prayerfully addressed as our Lord hangs on the cross. Paul Gerhardt, a German hymn writer who lived in the 1600's, translated the last section of this poem from the original Latin. This section, which addresses Christ's head, ran to 10 stanzas and was incredibly popular. Several individuals

translated the German version into English, but the beauty and power of St. Bernard's words remain undiminished.

Originally created by Hans Leo Hassler for a funeral text, the tune was joined to the present text by Johann Cruger in a hymnal produced in 1656. Johann Sebastian Bach used the tune 5 times in his magnificent St. Matthew Passion. He also used it in his Christmas Oratorio and in five cantatas. When someone of Bach's religious and musical stature thinks that highly of a tune, we had better pay attention!

This, finally, is where our Beautiful Savior comes. The One who shone brighter and purer than the angels, whose face shone more brightly than the noonday sun on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, comes to a bitter cross. *How art thou pale with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn; how does that visage languish which once was bright as morn!*

But we are not allowed simply to deplore the terrible tragedy that has befallen Jesus. Nor are we allowed to push the blame on anyone else - not the Jews or the Romans, not people of nationalities, religions or colors we despise or fear. No, like the Gospels themselves, this hymn presents an unvarnished truth: *Thy grief and bitter Passion were all for sinners' gain. Mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.*

We sometimes wonder why the Church pounds human sinfulness into our heads. Why do we fixate on our faults and failings, rather than on our giftedness and blessedness, our new life in Christ? Why must we so conti-

nually confess our sins, even when we don't think they're all that bad?  
Why does the Church constantly march us to Golgotha?

Holy Scripture tells us: sin is not primarily a matter of breaking rules. It is, first and foremost, the trashing of our relationship with God and with other people. However we may doll it up, make excuses, provide explanations, it is nothing less than scorning God and spitting in his face. The soldiers did it; the scribes and passers-by did it; even the thieves hanging next to Jesus did it. And so do we.

I recently read an article about the spread of computer-facilitated fraud and theft. The author made a perceptive point. Although people *are* afraid of being caught *in the end*, they are much *more* afraid of being caught *in the act*. Nobody likes being caught red-handed. No sane person likes having others *witness* shameful acts, even when there's an overpowering desire to *commit* them. Many people are deterred by "will someone see me" even when they would *not* be deterred by "is this right or wrong?"

The Passion narratives - and the Passion chorale - put all human sinfulness, including ours, right where everyone can see it. The grief, shame, and scorn weighing Jesus down? The mockery, the crown of thorns, the flogging, the spitting, the jeering? *That is each of us, and all of us, in every moment of sinful choice. We are "caught in the act" of spitting in the face of God himself, and this is what it finally, actually looks like.*

Our silent, nasty thoughts strip Jesus naked; our hurtful words and self-serving excuses land like whips across his back. Our failure to do some good within our power is like the mock homage given by the soldiers. Our self-destructive habits and selfish indulgences; our words and deeds of thoughtless or deliberate cruelty place us at Calvary with the onlookers who jeered, taunted, or thought, "It's not my business."

When people are caught in the act, caught red-handed, there is no question of guilt. The deed in its awfulness is there for God and everyone to see. All that remains is the appropriate penalty. So here we are, standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, the spittle and curses still on our lips. We may deny or object, but Holy Scripture acts like those "red light cameras" at intersections, catching us in the act of our sinfulness and exposing it and developing it and printing it out for all to see, including the Judge who will determine our sentence.

And the only reason we dare to be here, today; the only reason we can sing "O, I'll Cherish the Old Rugged Cross," or "In the Cross of Christ I Glory," is the astounding verdict proclaimed in Holy Scripture and in an ancient hymn's stark, simple words: *Thy grief and bitter passion were all for sinner's gain; mine, mine was the transgression, but thine, the deadly pain!*

The Judge takes off the black robe and comes down to stand beside the accused. The prosecuting attorney becomes the attorney for the de-

fense. The death sentence is taken by the one who was himself most wronged, and the wrongdoer is rehabilitated right there in the courtroom and given the power to not only repent but to be transformed into the very likeness of the innocent victim. *That's* what happens as we stand before that still figure in torment on the cross of our devising.

But that's courtroom language; although it's entirely appropriate and theological, it doesn't get down to the heart of what's happening. Judge, prosecuting attorney, one most wronged... no longer. *What language shall I borrow to thank thee, **dearest friend**?* Another hymn puts it this way: *Which of all our friends, to save us, could or would have shed his blood? But this Savior died to have us reconciled in him to God. This was boundless love indeed; Jesus is the friend we need.*

In the end, this sacred face, despised, marred, disfigured by our despising which is the heart of our sin, still turns towards us in love, pity, forgiveness and grace. Beautiful with the radiance of God's costly love, he gazes at us. He has caught us in the act. And still he looks with love upon us, as he did upon Peter when Peter denied him thrice. And Peter wept, broken and remade through that loving look. So at last on this grave day, we hear the announcement of our greatest confidence and comfort. Even in our death, which would otherwise be the final bitter penalty for sin, we are invited to gaze upon his loving face, and know that he holds us forever in his love. For those who do look to him in humble, repentant faith, he

promises that he will never render the final verdict of *guilty* or the final sentence of death by being cut off and rejected forever by the God whom we rejected in our sinfulness. He has put that behind him; *it's* still nailed to the Cross even after he has left that bitter tree; *it's* still buried in the tomb even after he has gloriously arisen from its cold embrace.

Thanks be to God the Father for the incomparable mercy he has shown us in the passion, death, and resurrection of his dear Son! Now, by the grace and power of his Holy Spirit, we may pray and sing: *These eyes, new faith receiving from thee shall never move; for he who dies believing dies safely in thy love. Amen.*