

CONFERENCE ON THE PASSION OF JESUS

As you walk in to most any Catholic Church you will see a figure of Jesus nailed to the cross. The crucifix usually has a very prominent position in the sanctuary. Christ's death on the cross was a central event in the salvation of human beings.

I remember the story of parents who brought their four year old boy to church for the first time. As he entered the church from the back his eyes were transfixed to the large crucifix hanging in the sanctuary. The boy stopped. In a distressed voice he asked his parents why that man was hanging up there? The parents tried to quietly explain that it was Jesus and some bad people had nailed him to the wood. Yet they knew nothing they said would be an adequate explanation for their son at his age. The next Sunday as they entered the church their son stopped them again and said in a very loud distressed voice, "Look Dad, he's still up there. Why doesn't somebody help him down.?" We could ask that too from our adult perspective and deeper understanding.

We are taught early in our Christian education that Jesus died for our sins, that Jesus' death won forgiveness for our sins, That Jesus' death and resurrection brought us the hope of eternal life. This gruesome murder in essence enabled us to receive forgiveness from God of our sins and receive the promise of eternal life in heaven and that combination is the essence of Salvation. Our Salvation won by Christ. We have learned these teachings from our earliest years as we were introduced to the teachings of our faith. Simpler explanations led to deeper ones as we grew in our ability to understand. No Christian doubts that Jesus is our Savior. But what is the connection between his death on a cross and our forgiveness? How does one person's death, namely Jesus' death, bring forgiveness to another person such as you and me, and every other human person ? How is it that Jesus death won the opportunity for forgiveness for sins not yet committed and persons like any one of us who in Jesus' time had not yet been born ? What is this connection between a willing death and anyone's forgiveness?

As you might guess there are many ways to phrase this question of the cross, and over the 2000 years of Christianity many theologians have offered theological explanations from various perspectives. And consequently we have received several insights into this mystery. But each one is incomplete and only sheds light from a certain angle. I would like to in this talk look at this mystery of salvation from one perspective that has helped me in my struggle to understand and appreciate Jesus' sufferings.

But I need to review several things we know that shed light on the question of the cross. I will call each of these a "spotlight" coming from a different angle but each spotlight will converge on Jesus as he hangs on the cross.

The first spotlight is a review of our theological understanding of Jesus. Jesus Christ was born of Mary and is Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is a Divine person, not a human person. But, Jesus is the most complex person in existence. Jesus has two full natures, the nature of God and the nature of man. Neither God the Father nor God the Holy Spirit have two natures, only Jesus. That is why I say that Jesus is the most complex person in existence. Jesus Christ as Son of God second Person of the Trinity is all knowing, omniscient, has a Divine Will, and has all the qualities of God. Jesus Christ, born of woman, has a full human nature. Therefore, Jesus in his human nature has separate but limited human intelligence, limited human knowledge, has all our human emotions, and a He has human will or decision making capacity. Put all this together and we come to the startling realization that Jesus had two separate decision making powers, that is, two wills, Divine Will and human will, and also two different sets of knowledge, limited knowledge in his human intellect and unlimited knowledge in his Divine intellect as God. We do not know how much information his divine intellect gave to or informed his human intellect. It seemed that Jesus knew much that we could never have known, yet on one occasion he stated that he did not know when his Second Coming would take place, that only the Father knew when. Fortunately in this talk I do not need to discuss this duality of knowledge of Jesus any further. But we do need to reflect on the fact or reality that Jesus had two wills, human and divine. And while they somehow worked separately and with their own proper attributes and powers, the person named Jesus had to bring these two wills together in a harmonious decision in order for him to proceed in any given situation.

What was Jesus' status as far as temptations are concerned? No person of the Trinity could be effectively tempted by Satan to commit a sin, it would be an internal contradiction of God. But Jesus in his human will could be tempted by Satan and this fact is clearly recorded in the Gospels, especially the famous temptation of Jesus in the desert at the beginning of his public life. Luke 4:13 "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him (Jesus) for a time." Jesus was tempted by Satan multiple times in various settings and only a few are recorded in the Gospels.

Some human decisions are actually a process , a gradual process of making a decision. And dealing with temptations may be such a process leading to an informed decision.

The second spotlight I would like to direct toward the cross relates to God's knowledge of coming events. God is not trapped in or limited to the present time as we are. In some mysterious way God sees the past, the present, and the future. But God does not take away our free will and many things God's sees a human or humans in the future doing things that are very much against his Divine will, something that is very distressing to God. Yet God will not reverse our decision to sin, He will not take away the gift even when it is used badly, even when God sees ahead an evil coming from it. God has given us the gift of free will so that we can freely choose that which is good and virtuous and so that we can freely choose God. And that means that God was willing from the beginning to take the risk of our decisions even those decisions that distressed God as sins.

Jesus from his divine knowledge that had informed his human intellect, spoke to his apostles about his future arrest, execution and resurrection. He made this prediction at least three times in advance of these events. eg. John 18: 31-33. But this does not in any way say that God desired that people execute Jesus. In fact, the crucifixion was the greatest sin against God. I personally cannot think of even Adam and Eve's sin as being materially as serious as the crucifixion of Jesus. That is my opinion from my limited knowledge and understanding. How God decided to react to the Jew's and Roman's decisions to crucify Jesus is worthy of note. And how Jesus decided to react with his foreknowledge of what was coming on that first Holy Thursday night is also worthy of notice. Discussion of these decisions will be a crucial part of this conference.

The Third spotlight is simply this. The idea and decision to Crucify Jesus came from the Jewish leaders. It was not a plan from God. It was a plan of humans. This is important to remember. God's choice, since He would not withdraw their free will, was centered around how to respond to the plan of humans to kill Jesus by crucifixion.

The fourth spotlight I would like to focus on is a review of some of the specific events in Jesus' life, namely attempts on his life. As it turns out the plan to crucify Jesus was at least the fourth plan humans had developed to kill Jesus. That is, four attempts are recorded in Scripture, there may have been others not recorded. First was King Herod's plan to kill the new born King of the Jews. God's response was to have Mary and Joseph run, escape

the plan. Flee to Egypt and remain there in safety for a while. The second attempt on Jesus' life like took place in Nazareth shortly after his public life began. Some of the people of Nazareth were so indignant at something Jesus told them in the synagogue that they grabbed him as he spoke in the synagogue, literally drove him out of town to the edge of a cliff and intended while they had him in their control to hurl him over the cliff headlong to his death. His response was apparently to use some of his Divine power to loosen their grip and then just walk through the astonished crowd and out of the town. In other words, the response of Christ in his Divinity was to escape. The third attempt on Jesus life took place in the vicinity of the Temple at the Portico of Solomon. He was engaged in a dialogue with those around him and some again became angry with Jesus because they could not accept his words. They picked up rocks to stone him, as they later stoned Stephen to death. Jesus continued for a few minutes to further conversationally engage them with his teaching. Then they tried to apprehend him and again he escaped from their power. John 11: 31-39.

In the months and weeks immediately preceding his crucifixion there were many plans developed to kill him, even then reigning King Herod had a plan as Scripture succinctly tells us. He was the son of the first King Herod. People were coming to Jesus to warn him to avoid certain areas and towns because they were not safe for him. In fact, it seems in the last few weeks of his life Jesus and his disciple were continually on the run to avoid persons intent on taking his life. All of his escapes from death plans and all of his efforts of avoid those who sought his life afforded Jesus a little more time for his ministry of teaching and healing and bring the good news of God's love and forgiveness. The question eventually became, would he continuously attempt to elude the multiple death plans.

Judas' decision to work a plan to betray Jesus seemed to mark a change in God's response to these increasing threats on Jesus life. The previous response to threats of escaping and evading seemed not be God's final choice. Man had decided to kill the one called Jesus , the Son of God, the son of Mary. It seemed that now God's response to this new threat was for Jesus not to attempt escape that night of betrayal. In God's vision of the future the betrayal plan of Judas was foreseen. God would not take away man's free choice. In this case it seems that it was the Father's will that Jesus not use his divine power to defend himself, and to not use his divine knowledge of coming events to flee from what was coming. It seemed that the Father's will was that Jesus rely solely on his human capabilities and best qualities of heart and soul just as we must do in any circumstance.

This is how we must live all of our lives. It seemed that the Father asked Jesus to endure the coming events as a human being without use of his Divine attributes.

Now we find Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane struggling in his humanity. We hear Jesus words of prayer to his Father in heaven. Mark 14: 32-42 the agony in the garden; "Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter, James and John and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch." He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said, "Abba, father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will." Mark tells us that three times Jesus prayed the same prayer, and in between these three times he returned to his disciples to disappointingly find them asleep. Finally Jesus said to them, (Mk 14: 41b-42) "The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Get up, let us go. See my betrayer is at hand."

What is going in Jesus' mind and heart and will. He is asking the Father to consider letting this threat to his life pass by. Maybe he is hoping for a little more time to preach, to reach a few people who had not yet heard him. Perhaps he is asking that some specific part of his impending passion be changed by God's power, "... all things are possible to you," "Take this cup away from me." It is pretty clear that we are hearing Jesus human will struggling with the hope for an alteration of the Divine will, an alternative plan, all things are possible for God, is there another way? It is also clear to us that by the end of his third prayer Jesus in his human mind recognizes that the Father does not want him to circumvent the consequences of the terrible plan on the part of humans. No more running, no more escapes, no more miracles for rescue. It is also clear by the time Jesus returns to the apostles that his human will has completed its struggle and has decided to go with the Father's will. It was a free human choice of heroic proportions and consequences. He agreed not to draw on his Divine power for self protection and He would not utilize the advantage of Divine fore-knowledge to get a head start and escape arrest. It would have been very easy for Jesus to climb up the not too high mountain behind the Garden of Olives and escape down the other side into the darkness of the Judean desert. Jesus' divine will and human will are now locked into the one word of YES. This all takes place before the arrest occurs but Jesus' temptations are hardly over. He has to keep that 'Yes' steady and repeating it during some gruesome torture and emotional pain.

Now we will look at the fifth spotlight focused on the cross, and this one seems to be the brightest. The LOVE factor. Jesus as a Divine person, Son of God, always and completely loved the Father and the Holy Spirit. As the Second Person of the Trinity, through whom, with whom, and for who all things were made, he always carried within him the love which the Creator of humanity had for his human creatures. Even after the deadly sin of Adam and Eve , and even after many, many human sins that followed God in all three Persons loved humanity. Jesus as Son of God in his Divine nature certainly loved humanity and that was an essential before his choice to take on human nature and be born of Mary. A human person's love for other humans does not come as easy as it does for God. We only slowly learn to love each other, and generally our love for others is limited. Loving your neighbor as yourself does not come automatically. First there must be growth psychologically to the point where we have the capacity to love. Then we must overcome so many things that tend to drive us apart. Becoming other-centered is a long road and only comes with time and is a struggle. Jesus in his human nature also had to go through a maturing process which took place in the presence of a village of people like all communities with various characters, temperaments, etc. I like to think that is why he was afforded a rather long hidden or ordinary life. It was during this time of thirty years that Jesus in his human nature came to know and to love people. This human love was probably supported and expanded by his full awareness in his human mind that God divinely loved these creatures called humans. But no matter what, Jesus came to love people and all humanity. It was an attribute of his humanity and Divinity. Both were together as one love for humanity. This matter of loving humanity was a great undertaking for his human heart and it was absolutely necessary that it have taken place to its fullness prior to his crucifixion. I will explain this further as we look at the cross with all the spotlights focused and shining.

Jesus in his humanity also learned to love God. His early experience of a little child with Joseph and Mary taught him about love and obedience to God. He came to know that God was his Father while accepting Joseph as his father here on earth. Jesus learned of his mission on earth and as he told us through Scripture his mission was to come to do the will of the Father . And he lived out His loving obedience to the Father throughout in his entire life. That drove his mission along with his human love for all people.

Now let us pull all of these factors together. As the great Passover holydays were approaching and Jesus had already brought Lazarus back from the dead the plots against Jesus life were at their peak. These were the plots of humans and the plots of Satan who wanted Jesus off the scene. Was it time to run or evade again? In the Divine wisdom of all ages it was seen by God as a time to stop running as we have said earlier. In the Divine wisdom it was considered the hour for Jesus to demonstrate how to live out everything he had taught about forgiveness and non-violence. "Forgive your enemies; do good to those who persecute you, forgive 70 times 7; And as Jesus told Peter in the Garden , "Put away your sword." Teaching ideals is easier than living out heroic ideals. Jesus was the greatest teacher of the way of love and he was soon to be the greatest liver of the way of love. On the first Holy Thursday night Jesus in his humanity was literally and figuratively pressed to the rocks. I wonder if Jesus was hoping for an extension of time so that he could continue his mission of preaching to reach people he had not yet seen and who had not heard yet the good news. Perhaps he was hoping that his disciples would not abandon him or that Mary would not have to endure seeing her son crucified. Perhaps Satan showed him people who would not appreciate his sacrifice, who were luke-warm or disinterested. We do not know all that could have gone through Jesus mind but we do know that He asked the Father if there was a way that "this hour might pass me by". In his prayer he must have heard the Father respond that this was the best time to quit running to live with only his human faculties, that human salvation would be on the other side. After the third prayer he got up and faced peacefully those who were approaching to betray and arrest him.

From the time of his arrest till the moment of death Jesus was subjected to the most gruesome torture that had been devised at that time. And even more was added. The Gospels give only the most limited of details, perhaps the writers could not stomach any recording any details. It is, however, through the writings of several mystics over the past centuries and into the present time that we know how gruesome and prolonged his torture. The movie, "The Passion of the Christ" was based on the writing of some of these mystics and was probably very close to reality. It is a movie given to our times. At any given moment during his scourging, crowning with thorns, way to Calvary with the cross on his back, through all the mocking, the impaling to the cross and hanging there for hours Jesus could have left. He could have left the cross and left all humanity forever. He could have called out to the Father, " They have gone too far, this sin is greater than any and all before, these humans are not worth saving, let us leave humanity and start again elsewhere." And if he had left earth, salvation would be gone forever.

Why did Jesus hang on? When humanity was hurling every form of vulgarity at him and their utmost in gruesome torture why did Jesus remain and continue his sinking toward human death? On the cross he cried out words that we do not like to hear and which we struggle to understand, "My God, My God why have you abandoned me?" What is going on at this moment? Well, it seems quite clear that the Father has withdrawn that feeling of love which had always consoled Jesus human heart through his life on earth. Jesus could no longer feel the Father's love which supported him all of his life. This left Jesus, in a sense, alone in his humanity. No more consolation from the Father. Now the final test was before his human will. Would Jesus continue on with no sense of God's closeness nearby? In his human nature would he still say 'YES' to the Father's will without the Father's consoling love. He was emotionally empty except for one feeling of love remaining. Beyond all of our understanding Jesus still loved humanity in his human heart, and he would not let go of this love for humanity.

During his public life just a few days before his crucifixion Jesus called out to those gather around him, " Jn 12:32 " And when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself." As Jesus hung on the cross in torture and without the consolation feeling of the Father's love he drew everyone to himself. He would not let humanity go, we were drawn tightly to his hearts. He had every external reason to let humanity go to leave us for good ,but Jesus would not. In his human will he would not let humanity go and he also would not abandon the Father's plan. This was the pinnacle moment of our salvation as he hung on the cross. And just as true, the Father could not reject the Son, Second Person of the Trinity. And that Divine person, true God and true man, hanging on the cross would not let go of humanity. God willingly accepted humanity along with his Son who was tightly hanging on to us even while humanity was at its absolute worst.

"Father forgive them, they know not what they do." And the Father said to Jesus YES. And Satan must have screamed NO, No, no. In his human will Jesus had given an immense 'YES' to God that counteracted in justice all the 'NO's' of humans through all ages. This loving 'yes' more than counteracted in justice the disobedience of Adam and Eve. It was a sufficiently heroic human YES on Jesus' part to counter balance all of the sins of humanity. Because of Jesus love for us ,and his simultaneous love for the Father, and his great YES to the Father, Divine Mercy completely encompassed Divine Justice. Mercy prevailed for all humanity.

Now mercy is offered to each person who ever walked , and will ever walk this earth. On our part we must choose to accept it by an act of our human, by asking God for his forgiveness.

Does Jesus desire anything in return ? The answer is "yes". He hopes for and longs for our love in return. He also desires an intimate relationship with each of us. He desires us to live so as to be with Him eternally in heaven.