

Good Friday... Martyrs 1

We call this Good Friday.

Historically it was a day on which the powers of darkness seemed triumphant... as they so often seem today.

Good Friday was a day of violence and bloodshed,
a day of cruelty and darkness,
a day of weakness and sorrow,
a day of tears and disbelief...

How could crucifixion – the cruelest Roman execution – happen to such a good man?

When we look over the short ministry of this good man, Jesus,
we realize that he seemed to know where his public ministry was headed,
due to the envy and fear of many of the leaders of Jerusalem.

The Jewish high priest Caiaphas, a day or so before Good Friday, had proclaimed that it was necessary that one man should die for the sake of the people...

Caiaphas spoke from fear that Jesus would lead a revolution against Rome and Rome would crush Israel.

Indeed Jesus *did* die for the sake of Israel and for all of us...

not because he was a violent revolutionary...

but because he preached a gracious, loving God, a forgiving God... a healing God.

Jesus has shown us the human face of God...

“He who sees me sees the Father.”

Jesus’ world was not ready to receive this revelation.

Jesus’ world was caught up in external rituals and purifications and exclusivity rules.

Jesus’ world was not ready for a God who gave love and forgiveness, included all in God’s mercy... outcasts, handicapped and even sinners, and asked love and forgiveness from us in return.

Jesus' world was broken by sin and the powers of darkness. Jesus had to confront these.

Ultimately Jesus had to bear the sinfulness of our world in his own broken body on the Cross

so that He could bring God's forgiveness and healing to our sinful and broken world.

Jesus stands with us in our brokenness and weakness.

Our God knows what it is to suffer...

Today...

The Powers of Death and Darkness

Seemingly still reign,

Crushing so many people.

So many silently succumb

Fearing death

Is more powerful

Than life.

These Powers of Death

Steal *our* life away...

Our joy, our peace,

Our hope, our compassion

"Why bother?"

"Why care?"

Cry the chained spirits...

So many entertained,

Happy-less consumers

Sunk in sadness,

Depression

Or despair...

Waiting listlessly

For new and improved

Money back

Guaranteed

Products

To deliver them...
And they are never delivered
 for long.

So many succumb to Opiod addiction
A slow, silent suicide.

O Jesus, deliver us!

Throughout our history since the time of Jesus
disciples of Jesus have had to confront the powers of darkness in our world.
Jesus is victorious over the powers of darkness
and our Father's healing graces are present in our world...

but God's ultimate victory over the powers of darkness
is still working its way thru our world.

The powers of darkness do not give up their reign easily.

Pope John Paul called these powers of darkness the culture of death.

Look at nations like North Korea today...
do you think that's just bad men running that country...
I believe there is an evil there that is more than just bad men.

Look at the genocide against Christians carried out by ISIS,

Do you think that was just bad men? There is a power of evil there.

I don't pretend to know how to confront these powers of darkness.

I do know that where sin and evil abound,
God's grace does more abound... as Paul says in his beautiful letter to the
small community of Christians in pagan Rome. (Rm 5)

I also know that the powers of darkness have confronted disciples of Jesus,
and indeed good people throughout the world,
down thru the course of centuries.

Some of Jesus' disciples have become martyrs – witnesses – to their firm faith in the goodness of God and their loyal discipleship to their crucified savior, Jesus.

Let's look at just a few examples of these courageous martyrs. For us Christians, martyrs do not kill others – that's an evil twisting of religion by a radical fringe. For us, martyrs are *witnesses* to our faith in Christ, witnesses in the face of the powers of darkness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, teacher and pastor of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church at the time of Nazi Germany, spoke out for a number of years against the Nazi regime, in the name of Jesus, as a disciple of Jesus.

In one of his many books, **The Cost of Discipleship**, Bonhoeffer says:

"Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace."

That was a sharp warning to his own church, which was engaged in bitter conflict with the official Nazified state church. Ultimately he was arrested, imprisoned, sent to a concentration camp, and executed by hanging on April 8, 1945.

Sr. Dorothy Stang was a spry, lively 74-year-old nun, a member of the Notre Dame de Namur Sisters. She had worked in the interior of Brazil from 1966 to 2005, among the poor and disadvantaged. She was born in 1931 and raised on a farm in Dayton, OH. She entered the convent after high school, taught native Americans and migrant workers in Arizona til 1966, then was called by God to go to Brazil. In July of 2004 Brazil gave her citizenship among her beloved people.

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

In December 2004 she received a Human Rights Award from the Brazilian Lawyers Association for her work among the peasants of interior Brazil, where villagers were being harassed, their homes burnt down, and some even murdered... by some ruthless and greedy ranchers, illegal loggers, and wealthy landowners.

Sr. Dorothy tried to protect the rights of "her people" from these forces.

On February 12, 2005, Sr. Dorothy was on her way to meet a group of farmers whose homes had been burned down.

While she walked toward Boa Esperanca, she heard taunts from men who had stopped alongside her.

The rain poured as she stopped and opened her Bible.

She read to the men.

They listened to two verses, stepped back and aimed their guns.

Sr. Dorothy raised her Bible toward them and they fired six shots at point blank range.

She fell to the ground, martyred.

As she died, she was reading, "Blessed are you who are poor..."

costly grace in the face of the powers of darkness.

Giving witness to our following a crucified savior, body broken, blood poured out... dying under the powers of darkness.

Jesus himself said... unless you are willing to take up your cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple...

More recently our world was blessed by another martyr for Jesus and his values...

Have you heard the name Shabbaz Bhatti...

Shabbaz was a Pakistani member of the Pakistan Congress, a Catholic, who was trying to repeal the Pakistani law against converting from Islam to Christianity... a law which was being used to persecute Catholics in Pakistan.

Listen to his words...

"I have been asked to put an end to my battle, but I have always refused, even at the risk of my own life.

My response has always been the same. I do not want popularity, I do not want positions of power.

I only want a place at the feet of Jesus.

I want my life, my character, my actions to speak of me and say that I am following Jesus Christ.

This desire is so strong in me that I consider myself privileged whenever—in my combative effort to help the needy, the poor, the persecuted Christians of Pakistan –

Jesus should wish to accept the sacrifice of my life.

I want to live for Christ and it is for Him that I want to die.

I do not feel any fear in this country.”

Shabbaz was gunned down on a Pakistan street by radical Islamists...

The Catholic bishops of Pakistan have asked that his cause for sainthood be advanced...

for he was a martyr, witnessing by his death, to Jesus.

Costly grace.

Sometimes taking up our cross means witnessing to the values of Jesus and a loving God in the midst of a culture of death...

a culture of self-interest, self-pampering, self-centeredness...

I want it my way, I don't care what you say, I want it my way – kind of world.

What say you about the taking of human life...

innocent, vulnerable, small, seemingly insignificant life?

What say you about quickly and mercifully ending of the life of an elderly, useless, insignificant old person...

ending it quickly and easily and cheaply with a pill...

rather than give her palliative care and take time to visit her so that she is not alone?

What does Jesus say? What *would* Jesus do?

(I had a powerful experience while visiting the sick elderly in the hollers of W.V. while preaching a mission there several years ago...

I penned this poetic reflection:

I hear the laments
Of bent and broken bodies
In bondage
To black lung, arthritis,
Swollen joints
Or just fragile old age.

I hear the laments
Of caregivers
Strained and stressed,
Seemingly trapped
By love's duty,
Suffering with the suffering
Pained by the pained.

I hear the laments
On present day calvaries
I kneel in awe
Before pain born bravely
And love laboring.
Where is God?
Here... in this smelly, small
Sacred room,
In this wrinkled, weathered
Worn face,
Smiling a welcome
To me.

These are the unseen.
Our society is unable
And unwilling
To abide these
Un-beautiful people.
Our world's wisdom
Vanishes in their presence.
What brings happiness?
Obsession?

Hilfinger?
Big car?
Caviar?
Cartier?
Our world's wisdom
Free falls into the gorge of suffering
And crashes onto its rocks.

Do we fear to approach them?
These lamenting ones?
Do we fear our own demise,
Glimpsed in them?
The fragility of our lives,
Buttressed now by youth,
Beauty, strength,
And seeming control?

What can we bring to them?
What does God give us?
Our time
Our smile
Our heart, in a few words.
Lord, make me an instrument
Of your peace...your love.

As I visited with these broken men and women I realized that Jesus knows what it is to suffer and be broken...
I had a deep realization that Jesus was somehow there with me in the small, simple, poor places where these folks lived.
I could almost hear Pilate say:

Ecce Homo...
Behold the man
Behold the one who suffers.)

How do we give witness of Jesus in the midst of a world that would rather forget about the poor, the elderly, the suffering, the lonely... and those with handicaps.

How do we give witness to our discipleship to Jesus?

We know how disciples of Jesus gave witness in the past...
even to the point of martyrdom.

We might not be called to be martyrs,

but our discipleship to Jesus challenges us to carry the cross in our world.
Are we a part of the culture of life, or the culture of death?

Like Jesus we might be laughed at and persecuted...

We too might be suffering servants, like Jesus.

Our life is not about being an entertained consumer.

We don't believe God made us to be happy.

We believe God made us to love...

like Bonhoeffer, like Sr. Dorothy Stang, like Shabbaz Bhatti...

We believe that Jesus calls us to love others, to care for others, to be
compassionate toward others – especially those who are in need... to believe
in and work towards a culture of life – as Pope John Paul II encouraged us in
his Encyclical **Culture of Life, Culture of Death.**

Conclusion:

That is what this Cross of Christ symbolizes today...

The suffering Jesus,

The suffering and broken of our world beside whom Jesus stands,

Those broken in martyrdom, shedding their lives for Jesus' sake,

Our own crosses which we bear...

our brokenness, our weaknesses and the difficulties of being a disciple in our
world which so often rejects the values and ideals of Jesus.

When you come forward to reverence this Cross,

reverence Jesus who suffered upon it,

whose blood soaked into this Cross,

whose love and forgiveness shone thru this Cross.

Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus.