

Good Friday Veneration of the Cross Liturgy: The Tree of the Cross is the Tree of Life

“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

These are the first words of the Twenty-second Psalm. We heard Jesus praying these words last Sunday during the proclamation of the Passion from the Gospel of Matthew. To understand why Jesus would say this we need to listen to some of the rest of this psalm:

Yet you, O God, are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you set them free. When they cried to you, they escaped. In you the trusted and never in vain.

But I am scorned by men, despised by the people. All who see me deride me. They curl their lips, they toss their heads. “He trusted in the Lord, let him save him; let him release him if this is his friend.”

Like water I am poured out, disjointed are all my bones. My heart has become like wax, it is melted within my breast.

Parched as burnt clay is my throat, my tongue cleaves to my jaws.

Many dogs have surrounded me, a band of the wicked beset me. They tear holes in my hands and my feet and lay me in the dust of death.

I can count every one of my bones. These people stare at me and gloat, they divide my clothing among them. They cast lots for my robe.

The Passion we have just proclaimed, that from the *Gospel of John*, points out the fulfillment of these prophecies made perhaps by King David himself 1000 years earlier, as well as those made during the exile, 550 years before Christ. Jesus was scorned by the arrogant. He thirst. He had holes torn into his hands and feet. The wicked divided his clothes and cast lots for his robe. But Jesus never give up his faith that his Father would save him. So the psalm ends:

O Lord, do not leave me alone, my strength make haste to help me.....I will tell of your name to my brethren and praise you where they are assembled.

Due to His faith in the work of His Father, His determination to complete the sacrifice of His life as a pure offering to God for the sins of the world, due to His love for us, His people, the wood of the cross has become the Tree of Life. And love conquered hate, good conquered evil and eternal life conquered death.

The Lord calls us to His Cross today. He tells us to give Him our fears, our sorrows, our pains, and even, and especially, give Him our sins. He says to us, "This is why I am here. I willingly suffer for you. Give it to me. Give it all to me." He takes them all upon Himself. He dies so we can live.

What are our concerns? What are our fears? Perhaps our health is declining. Maybe there are those we love who are very sick. Maybe we are suffering from the death of a loved one. Perhaps our families are going through a stressful time. For many in our parish, months of unemployment and underemployment have taken not just a financial toll, but a personal toll as many question their own self worth.

Certainly we are all fighting against sin, sin in the world, sin in each of our lives, the very existence of sin. There are times all of us feel beaten down.

"Come to the cross," Jesus says today. "Come to the cross and give it all to me. I am here on the cross for you. I want to take it all upon myself. I want to die for you so you can live for me."

And we join King David in proclaiming another psalm, Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offense. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.

My offenses truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned. What is evil in your sight I have done.

Indeed you love truth in the heart; then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom. O purify me, then I shall be clean; O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear rejoicing and gladness, that the bones you have crushed may revive. From my sins turn away your face and blot out all my guilt.

A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, nor deprive me of your holy spirit.

Give me again the joy of your help; with a spirit of fervor sustain me, that I may teach transgressors your ways and sinners may return to you.

And we walk up to a cross this afternoon. We venerate the cross, kissing a symbol of the Lord's sacrifice. For by the wood of the cross, all that kills us, all that is killing us, is being destroyed.

The tree of the cross, that symbol of death, is the Tree of Life.