The Challenge Of The Cross
Palm Sunday - Passion Of The Lord 2017

Reflection By: Deacon Paul Hursh
For me, this image of the cross by Matthias Grunewald invites questions—hard questions. Questions like:

- Is our God a bloodthirsty god who demands a sacrifice?
- Why is God unable to simply forgive us, without human blood to satisfy him?
- Is it just to execute an innocent person to spare the guilty? How does that even work?
- If the cross was a payment, who was being paid off? Was it even God?

The crucifixion is a historical fact recorded by Titus Flavius Josephus (37 – c. 100), a first-century Romano-Jewish scholar, and by among others (Apostle Paul and the author of the Gospel of the Hebrews). It is also highly unlikely that the early Christian community would have invented the embarrassing and painful death of their leader by crucifixion. Certainly, because Jesus is like us in all things, but sin, would live a life that would end in his physical death. The resurrection, on the other hand, is an article of faith, something for which there is no proof. (If something can be proved, no faith is required.) However, like the grace that comes from this belief, the resurrection itself is an unearned, and underserved gift. St. Bonaventure did not consider the incarnation foremost as a remedy for sin, but as the primacy of His love and the completion of creation. God sent his Son in love freely to everyone, regardless of state, or conviction, or belief. To receive this gift, one only needs to receive it.

It is not heretical to ask questions like those proposed above. Remember, ‘A faith unquestioned is no faith at all.’ As Thomas Aquinas instructed, reason should inform our faith. For me the most helpful question to ask is, “Where is God in this Passion Narrative?” Or, in any situation – “Where is God now?”

There is a story that comes out of the Holocaust that is instructive. There was an infraction by the prisoners in a concentration camp and the punishment decided on by the camp commandant was the hanging of 12 young boys. The executions were to be performed in front of all the camp and the people were made to watch the proceedings. As the order was given and the 12 boys were dangling and jerking at the end of the ropes, someone in the camp cried out, “Where is God? Where is God now?” Then silence, and after a few moments someone else cries out, while pointing at the gallows and the dying children, “There, God is there!”

When it comes to the crucifixion of Jesus, and the part that God played in Jesus’ execution, the answer is right in front of us… God hangs on the cross.

The suffering Jesus on the cross is not Jesus making a payoff or taking the place for those who should suffer or pay the price for sin. No doubt that the cross is the result of our sin, and by his death Jesus saves us from ourselves, but there is deep teaching that is transmitted by a death like his. As during the rest of his time on Earth, Jesus is modeling for us by his life and his death, what we are called to do when the circumstances of life weigh us down. When the choices people make, result in suffering, we are not to respond in kind with violence and hatred. We are, like Jesus, to speak the truth of God, who is Love, to not resist evil, but to lay down our lives for others. This is not acquiescence to evil, or to condone violence, but to break the cycle of hatred, indifference, and violence; once, for all. We do this by following the example of Jesus, by becoming a bridge to understanding, forgiveness, and compassion. His instruction to
his disciples remains for us today, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24b)

The uncomfortable resolution I have arrived at in my questioning regarding Jesus' torturous death, is that Jesus saved the world by redeeming our sinful nature, and he did it by way of the cross. Our lives should follow His. When we embrace the cross (life & death – sin & grace) even to the point of despair – “My God, my God why have you forsaken me!” (Matthew 27:46b) – God hears our cry and in response to our call He will give us the grace to forgive others’ transgressions, - “Forgive them Father for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) We will not speak this on our own, for it is God who will speak through us and with us. And by this action all will be reconciled and He will raise us on the last day. As Paul once wrote, and we too could declare, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, the Church…” (Cf. Colossians 1:24).