

## **By your holy cross you have redeemed the world**

*Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo*

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“Behold the man!” When Pontius Pilate spoke these words on that first Good Friday, he was trying to prove Jesus’ innocence. He had tried him and found nothing in him worthy of the death that the Sanhedrin was demanding. He wanted to let him go. “I have interrogated him. I have even punished him for whatever crime you may think he committed. Look at him now! I’ve done all I have to do. Now leave him, and leave me alone!”

But it wasn’t enough. The crowd was on the verge of a riot, the same crowd that celebrated when he entered into Jerusalem a few days before. Their hosannas had died out, and now they demanded that Jesus be put to death. And Pilate, who will forever be known for this act of weakness, caved in. He let them do what they wanted, and he turned over Jesus to be crucified.

Two thousand years later, Pilate’s words continue to ring out, only now we hear them with a new, prophetic meaning. On this day above all other days, God himself is asking us to behold the man. He is asking us to look at Jesus hanging upon the cross - wounded, bruised, crowned with thorns - and see him as our Savior, our Lord, and our King.

Behold the man! He stands before all of us as an innocent victim. Look intently at this man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, and see the One who bore all of our sins. Fix your eyes on him, and see your redemption. See the lengths to which God went to rescue us from death. See the love of Christ - a passionate love that is even willing to endure the cross for the sake of our salvation. Behold the man, and know that he embraced this fate because he loves us.

But there is more. As we behold the man Jesus, we are also beholding ourselves, and humanity itself. We are seeing what our sin, our pride, our selfishness look like. We are seeing a picture of how sin has marred us and distorted us. Like the man beaten and left for dead on the roadside until the Good Samaritan rescued him, Jesus stands before us now, and he shows us how wounded and desperate we are without him. He is showing us what sin does to us, hoping that we will surrender ourselves to him today and start a new chapter. So behold him, and see what he has saved us from.

Jesus’ cross not only shows us the full force of evil, but it also shows us the full power of God’s mercy. We look at the evil in the world, and again this week we have witnessed yet another act of terrorism in Brussels, a manifestation of evil that leaves us crushed and bewildered. This evil looks like an abyss, a great void: empty of love, empty of goodness, empty of life. But Jesus, God made man, who died on the cross, fills that abyss of sin with the depth of his mercy. In fact, on Good Friday, as we look at the cross, we discover beyond doubt that God is mercy. As Pope Francis tells us: “The cross of Christ is the supreme proof of the mercy and love that God has for us, a love that can heal any wound, any sin.” And John tells us, Jesus loved us “to the end,” meaning not only to the last instant of his earthly life, but to the farthest limit of love itself.

So the cross of Christ is not a defeat or a failure at all. The cross is love and mercy. The cross reveals to us that love that alone can overcome evil and sin. When we become discouraged at the sin around us, or the sin within us, we must still behold the man. We must always remember the victory of Jesus on the cross, and his power to free us from sin and death. Even in his agony on the cross, Jesus is Lord and King. At the moment of his death, John tells us Jesus bowed his head and “he handed over his spirit.” It was not taken from him, he gave it up. He freely gave his life and breathed his last so we might live and breathe in the spirit of God’s mercy.

John also tells us that a soldier opened his side with a lance, and blood and water flowed out. Even in death, Jesus gives the saving streams of mercy for us, which the Fathers of the Church interpret as Baptism and Eucharist.

But it is not enough to merely look, simply to behold. This experience must change us. What Jesus has done for us cannot only be a poignant image that we carry around in our memory. It must change us; we must allow him to change us. As we behold the man Jesus upon the cross, he looks back at us, and he reaches into our hearts. He opens our hearts to love, and lifts us up to his heart. He floods our minds with the truth that God can save us if we will allow him. He breaks our hearts that have been hardened by sin so we might have new hearts, hearts made for holiness and compassion.

We cannot look upon Jesus crucified and imagine that nothing should change. He changes everything. He calls us to leave behind whatever sin has distanced us from him. He calls us to give the mercy that we have received, to be his messengers and apostles of love for those who have not known love. Our presence here today is a kind of commissioning. Jesus imprints upon us his own image and likeness and sends us out to fill that abyss with the gift of his love and mercy. He sends us to those who have no hope, and shows them that he is their hope. All this he accomplishes from the cross, the cross that we will venerate, the cross that he willingly carried, where we behold him as our Savior.

So yes, behold the man today. Weep for him, praise him, thank him, worship him. Give him your life, because he gave himself so completely for you. “We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”