

“We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”

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

Apr. 14, 2017

*Good Friday
Cathedral of St. Mary
Fargo, ND*

If you've been to Stations of the Cross, you know well the verse that is said at the beginning of each station: “We adore you O Christ and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” This is Good Friday, the day of the cross. It is that day in the Church's year when our hearts are filled with a mixture of sorrow and gratitude, regret and relief.

We listen yet again to the Gospel account of our Lord's passion and death, and we find ourselves again walking the way of the cross with Jesus. In the shadow of the cross, we will open our hearts in prayer, praying to God for the needs of the Church and the world, especially the poor, the suffering, the persecuted, the estranged. And with those prayers still in our hearts, we will come forward to venerate and adore the cross, “on which hung the Savior of the world.” Then, with deep faith and thanksgiving for his sacrifice, we will receive our Lord and Savior in Holy Communion, uniting ourselves to him in that moment of his greatest sacrifice. Finally, we will leave this church in silence. No further words will be adequate before the stark mystery of the cross.

Dear friends, let us see the cross not only as an instrument of vengeance and death but also as the key that unlocks the door of God's love and mercy. And at the same time, let it be the key that unlocks the doors of our hearts by forgiving our sins and opening the way to the Father of mercies who loves us beyond measure. I suspect we all know that sin has a way of shutting the door on God's love and mercy, keeping him always at a distance. In our sinfulness and willfulness, we have no power to re-open that door that we have closed. On our own, we cannot atone for our sins. But God can. In the great plan of his mercy, God sent his divine Son to share in our humanity, and even though he was completely innocent, to take upon himself the sins of the world – all of them, great or small.

This Jesus did as he prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he was unjustly tried by the chief priests and then by Pontius Pilate. He bore our sins as he was mocked, scourged, beaten, and burdened with the cross, and finally made to walk under its weight toward Calvary. As he was lifted high on the cross, the Son of God made man accepted his fate. He declared “It is finished,” and he breathed his last. The brutal death of Jesus summed up and manifested our estrangement from God and from one another. It is a tragic proof of the gravity and destructiveness of sin.

It's always tempting to explain away sin, to minimize its significance, to think that it's just not a big deal. But the terrible death of Jesus on the cross proves otherwise, and sets us straight. It casts aside any illusion that we don't really need to be redeemed. We can see it in the world around us, still wracked by hatred and violence, and we can honestly see it in our own lives too. The cross lays bare the truth. Our Lord's suffering then lifeless body upon the cross is the ultimate reality check. And yet, his utter and complete gift of self, his sacrifice of love, stands forever as the key that unlocks the limitless mercies of God the Father, that wins for us a new start in grace. This gift wins for us a totally new life, and puts us on a new path of freedom from our sins. The cross makes it possible, even now, for us to share in the Father's love.

It is the cross that unlocks the door of mercy, that mercy which we experience when we read the Scriptures prayerfully, or when we open our hearts in prayer during the Sacrifice of the Mass. Upon the cross, Jesus offered his body and blood as the ultimate sacrifice to atone for our sins, and we worship him there every time we receive him in Holy Communion. It is the cross that unlocks the door of forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, wherein our sins are forgiven and we are given a new lease on life.

From the cross, Jesus sends us forth to carry the burdens of others, those around us in need, those who live next door, or those on the other side of the world who are persecuted for the name of Jesus, especially in the land made holy by our Lord's birth and earthly life. Jesus upon the cross is a sign to everyone that they are loved, more than they could ever imagine. In the Gospel of John we read: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," and he gave him up to die on the cross for you and for me.

In his last act on the cross, Jesus gave us his mother to be our mother. To the beloved disciple he said, "Behold your mother." So let us stay close to Mary, the sorrowful mother, as she stands at the foot of the cross, silently grieving, but never losing faith. Let us ask her today, on this Good Friday, to help us accept those trials that come into our lives as the will of our Father. And let us ask her to help us to take up our own cross every day and remain close to Jesus, her son and our crucified Lord.

This is the day of the cross, the day that we call "good" when Jesus died on the cross. Let us come with confidence and humility to the throne of grace by adoring the cross as the key to our salvation. "We adore you O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world."