

Passion (Palm) Sunday

Cycle A

April 17, 2011

Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

The Third Cross

Several years ago, a Muslim man was visiting a small Trappist monastery in the Northern African country of Algeria.

This Muslim and the prior of the monastery were old friends. The prior took his guest on a tour of the building, and eventually they came to the chapel.

The Muslim stopped and just stared at the crucifix. Eventually, the prior asked his friend what he saw in the cross.

The Muslim man said: *“I see maybe three crosses here, certainly two crosses. There is definitely the cross in front and the cross in the back.*

“The one in the front is formed by the extended arms of Jesus. It was created by God and is the cross of God’s embracing love.

“The second cross is the one behind Jesus. It was made by humanity and is the cross of hatred.

“But it was love and not really nails that attached Jesus to this second cross. And it is this love which keeps drawing us to him.”

The prior could see all of this, but he asked his Muslim friend: *“What is the third cross that you see?”* The visitor responded: *“The third cross, it seems to me, is between the other two crosses.*

“Isn’t it perhaps you and I struggling to loosen ourselves from the cross of evil and sin behind, so that we can bind ourselves to the cross of love in front? Isn’t the struggle of moving from violence to peacemaking, from hatred to love, isn’t that struggle a third cross?”

The Message of Holy Week

That Muslim man is quite insightful.

We can discern three crosses on every crucifix. And by the way, maybe this is one reason why in our Catholic tradition we have a crucifix in our churches – a cross with the figure of Jesus on it – and not just a plain cross.

We are moved by the first cross. This cross is Jesus himself reaching out to us in our humanity with the love of God.

Then we are confronted by the second cross. This cross is the one that we construct out of our self-centeredness, vindictiveness and prejudice, the cross on which we crucify both Jesus and one another.

Holy Week calls us to take up the third cross. It calls us to take up the spirit of the humble and compassionate Christ in the first cross.

It calls us to loosen ourselves from the crosses we have made – the second cross. And it calls us to attach ourselves to the self-giving, sacrificial love of God – and that is the third cross.

I hope that this will be a helpful way for us to look at the crucifix from now on. I hope it is a helpful way to recall the message that Holy Week has for us.