

TITLE: “Christ Our Brother on the Cross”

Brothers love to argue. My brother and I seemed to be always debating over petty things when we were kids, “whose turn is it to sit in the front seat?” or “is that baseball cap mine or yours”... “it’s mine ... you gave it to me ... no I didn’t ... yes you did.” Whenever my grandfather heard us arguing he would interrupt us, as if he were about to offer us a nugget of ancient wisdom, and we would stop arguing to hear what he had to say. Without fail, every time he’d say, “you boys are arguing like brothers” and then he would just look at us and laugh. At the time, I found it really annoying. “What do you mean, we’re arguing like brothers? Can’t you see how my brother has wronged me, and how pompous and arrogant he is? He’s not acting like my brother, he’s acting like my enemy.” What my grandfather realized, and what I did not, was that this is exactly how brothers behave. My brother was older than me and he expected a certain amount of respect, and I was not about to give it to him.

God knows this about brothers, of course. He knows that the older brother gets the inheritance, and in fact, he commanded Moses to be sure that no father deprives the older brother of his right to inherit. And yet, when it comes to God’s miraculous intervention in the story of humanity, God reverses this principle and says “the older shall serve the younger.” Later on, when King David was an old man, his son Adonijah decided that it was time for him to take the throne that was his

rightful inheritance. He was the oldest brother of those that remained of the children of David. So, he and Joab, the captain of David's army, threw a big party and proclaimed Adonijah the new King of Israel. But, as they were feasting, they heard the sound of another, louder party. They heard the shouts of crowds of people saying, "God save king Solomon, God save king Solomon."

How could this be? Solomon was the younger brother, the son of Bathsheba. Surely he doesn't have the right to be king in place of his older brother Adonijah. But David had gotten wind of Adonijah's planned coronation, and he sent Nathan the prophet to get Solomon and form a royal procession outside of the gates of Jerusalem. He told them to sit Solomon upon David's mule, to anoint him King of Israel, and to go up to Jerusalem, blowing trumpets and proclaiming "God save king Solomon" as they rode into the City of David. Nathan the prophet had told David, as soon as Solomon was born, that his name would also be "Jedidiah", which means "the One Who is Loved by the Lord." Then God told David that Solomon would reign on the throne of David after him and he would build a house for God's name, the great Temple of Solomon in the midst of Jerusalem.

When Christ, the son of David, came to Jerusalem to the shouts of "Hosannah" and "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord," the elders of the city were filled with envy. As we heard in last week's Gospel, they said to Jesus, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you say you've seen Abraham", to which he responded,

“Before Abraham was I am.” And they took up stones to stone him, but he hid himself from them. Today we see the reason why God reversed the order of the first-born son, by saying “the older shall serve the younger.” Because the inheritance is not an earthly one, but heavenly, and the price that we must pay for that inheritance is eternal. The law of God required that the sacrificial animal for Passover be a lamb, not an older sheep or a ram, but a perfect, unblemished lamb. The older shall serve the younger, because the younger will atone for the sins of the older. In a spiritual sense the older brother the old Adam and the sins of our first parents. In the cross of Christ, those sins were put away, the light of the old world was extinguished, and the pride and envy of the older brother was subdued by the innocent death of the Son of God, so that a new creation might be born from the death of the first-born.

The lesson from St. Matthew’s Gospel shows that even Pontius Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders, the elders and the chief priests, had handed Jesus over to him out of envy. They were the elders and the priests. God had given authority to them. If the Messiah was to come, then surely he would be one of their number, a man of their approval, chosen and endorsed by the Sanhedren as their official “Son of David.” But, as the elders and chief priests were plotting and looking for ways to subvert the Roman authorities on their own terms, like David’s son Adonijah, they heard the sound of celebration outside the city walls. It was the sound of people

shouting “Hosannah to the Son of David, blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord. Hosannah in the highest.”

When they heard that song being sung and shouted, they knew that this was a direct attack on their authority. The Son of David had come, and he was not chosen by them. When they saw Jesus riding on a colt, the people waving palm branches, strewing their garments on the ground in his path, they understood that this was a proclamation that a new Solomon was here, a new son of David, and perhaps, even the Messiah, who unlike Solomon, would not turn away the hearts of the sons of David in a dramatic fall from grace, but would turn the hearts of the sons to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to their sons. But surely this Nazarite, son of Joseph the carpenter, is not who he says he is. He teaches new things. His disciples don’t keep the traditions of the elders, they don’t fast. They pluck grain and eat it on the Sabbath day, and they don’t wash their hands before eating. This “son of David” even claims to be David’s Lord. He teaches blasphemy. He speaks the unspeakable name of God, the name YHWH “I am”, and He calls himself the Son of God, teaching that he and God the Father are one and the same. These are new teachings. These are radical teachings that threaten to overthrow all that God has taught us in the law of Moses.

Except the elders and priests had forgotten one crucial part of the law. Yes, Moses had proclaimed that the elder brother should not be denied his inheritance,

but he also said “the older shall serve the younger.” Ishmael was to be the servant of Isaac. Esau was to forfeit his inheritance to Jacob, and the brothers of Joseph would seek to destroy him, out of hatred and envy, because he foresaw that they would bow down to him as though he were king. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, and Jesus would be sold for ten more. When Pilate realized that the elders did not care about a fair trial, that they had handed Christ over out of envy, he gave them a choice: because it’s Passover, and the custom is to release a Jewish prisoner, who shall I release to you, Jesus or Barabbas? And they all shouted, “Barabbas!” What then shall be done with Jesus? “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Let him be tortured on this device of Roman invention. The elders were ready to sacrifice the Passover Lamb of God. As one of their own would say, “it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” The plan was set. Christ had predicted that he would die, and indeed he must die. Unless he dies, we are without hope. The Lamb must be slaughtered, the precious perfect lamb, whose blood was never marred by sin or guilt. That blood must be poured out, if our sins will be covered. If the older brother will be saved, then the younger must be put into his grave. As Joseph told his brothers, “you intended evil against me, but God intended all of this for good, so that I might save many people alive.” Christ said, “the Son of man must be lifted up, so that he might draw all men unto himself ... for God so loved the world, that he gave his only

begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

We often think about Christ’s sacrificial death and our minds focus on the pain, the sorrow, and the cutting off of life. But, in reality, what happened on the cross is not the loss of a life, but the beginning of life. The sacrifice of Christ on the tree of Calvary was not the removal of a life, but the pouring out of God’s life for the sake of ours. Even as he hung upon the cross, Christ offered his life for us. In the seven last words that he spoke from the cross, he proclaimed the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to sinners. He said, “Lord forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.” This is why Thomas A Kempis says, “In the cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is defense against our enemies; in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness, in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; in the Cross is the height of virtue; in the Cross is the perfection of holiness ... Behold then, how on the Cross everything hangs, and how in dying on it everything depends.”

The cross has the power to absorb our every evil thought or action or intention and turn it into good. Indeed, as Isaiah prophesied, “by his stripes, we are healed.” As one theologian says, “[On the cross] we may see God’s Goodness Wisdom and Power; yea his Mercy and Anger displayed. There we may see a Man Loving all the World, and a God Dying for Mankind. There we may see...all Kingdoms Adoring a

Transgressor: An Innocent Transgressor, yet the Greatest in the World. There we may see the most Distant Things in Eternity united....[The cross] is the only Supreme and Sovereign Spectacle in all Worlds. It is a Well of Life beneath, in which we may see the face of Heaven above: and the only Mirror, wherein all things appear in their Proper Colors, that is, sprinkled in the Blood of our Lord and Savior.” The Scriptures say that God is Love. Where else but in the cross do we see God? “See, from his head, his hands, his feet, / sorrow and love flow mingled down. / Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, / or thorns compose so rich a crown? 4 Were the whole realm of nature mine, / that were a present far too small. / Love so amazing, so divine, / demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Beloved, as we embark this holy week on our journey to the cross, let us meditate on the holy cross of Jesus and how everything that we desire hangs upon it, and how everything that we hope to do or become or to enjoy depends on us dying upon that cross. There are two brothers within each of us. The old Adam and the New. The old man within, is the one who draws us downward with the temptations to fulfill our own heart’s desire, to claim before God that we deserve something from him because of our strength, our successes, or because we have inherent value as his creatures. We minimize the power of the cross when we do not admit our sin. When we refuse to die upon the cross we crucify Christ in our hearts and then we use the cross to excuse ourselves in God’s sight. We do this all the time, don’t we?

How often have you found yourself saying something like this: “Oh, I did a sinful thing again. I know it was wrong, but I know God forgives me.” And just that quickly, you’ve absolved yourself from any guilt in the matter. Your conscience is clean after only a few seconds of inward discomfort. How often are you genuinely afflicted with sorrow in your heart because of your sins? Do you find yourself more upset about the things that you want that God has not given you, than the terrible disease of your wandering heart that required God himself to die in order to remake it? If you want to know the power of the cross, you must know that it was not because of how valuable you were to God that he died for you. You must know that you had swallowed a fatal poison, the moment your heart caught a glimpse of itself in the mirror, the moment you wanted some created thing or relationship with a passion greater than you had ever had toward the God who made you, and indeed a passion often directed against our brother, against our neighbor whom God made in his own image.

At the moment when you let your desire rule over you, you created the condition, the disease, the darkness within, for which the only possible solution is the death of God, the death of God’s own precious Son, the death of our heavenly brother. The nails piercing his hands, the crown of thorns pressing into his flesh, the wound in his side, destroying a perfectly innocent body already shamefully treated, spat upon, whipped, paraded about naked, mocked and laughed at, and why? Was it

not because you asked for it? Is this not what you wanted, when you wanted something other than God with all of your heart's desire? Was it not your corrupt heart that pierced the heart of Jesus, so that blood and water might run down eternally over you who were his enemy, so that in your nakedness, you might be covered, that in your shame, you might be swept up in his everlasting arms and kept dear and precious in the sight of God and all of his holy angels, every moment protected like a little baby wrapped up in swaddling clothes in the bosom of your God and king? It's not because of your value that God did this, but because of Christ's value. His blood and water, He poured out for you, so that each time you find yourself persecuted by the older brother within or without, each time that the foot of pride comes against you and you are tempted to desire immortality, power, and lust all for your own pleasure, that in that moment you might provide a shock to all the principalities and powers of evil by denying it all, by looking away from yourself and looking up to say with the Centurion, "surely [not I but surely] this was the Son of God."

Beloved, on the altar this morning, Christ comes to you, as he is here publicly proclaimed and displayed as crucified for the sins of the world, with his wounds open, exposing the nakedness of God's eternal love for all to see. On the cross everything hangs, because the God who is Love hangs there, and in dying on that everything that we love depends. Come here with your whole life in your hands, and

lay yourself at the feet of Christ your King. With the crowds and with the children in the Temple, sing “Hosanna, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” and open your sinful heart to his eternal and spotless heart of love. Here he offers you forgiveness, if you will truly open up and repent and turn from your ways and follow His way, the way of the cross.

In the cross of Christ, all things are made clear and manifest. Every desire of your heart is open before God, and every sin is done before his face as if he were not even there. Nothing is hidden from God. But in Christ, all is forgiven, not as though we forgive ourselves and excuse our sins, but if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Draw near, beloved, and take the body and the blood of Christ, and be cleansed. Live a new life, with God as your Father, and Christ your brother, and you will come to see the way of the cross as your only source of joy and delight, as Christ draws you daily all the way up to heaven upon that cross, having your whole life and conversation there, where true joys are to be found. In the name...