

A Meditation by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on Good Friday, April 22, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Stumbling Blocks and Foolishness

Let's take a minute to contemplate in silence the events we have just heard described in John's Gospel (John 19: 1-37)...

Silence

After their last supper Jesus and his disciples went to the garden. Remember it was in a garden where humankind fell from grace...where God apprehended Adam and Eve following their act of disobedience. Things grow in gardens...some good; some not so good. What is growing in my garden?

Silence

When they arrested Jesus he was taken before the religious leaders who asked him what he had been teaching. Jesus told them that all of his teaching had been public...none of it secret. "Why do you ask me what I have been teaching?" Did anyone ever listen? Do we listen? What do we know about what Jesus taught?

Silence

They took Jesus to Pilate, who immediately began by asking him if he was a "King of the Jews." A discussion of kingship follows. Jesus tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world... not from here." Every day we pray "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...". Do we know what we are praying for? What is this Kingdom? What is the will of God for its citizens?... Do we really want to be citizens of such a Kingdom?

Silence

Pilate had Jesus flogged and then handed him over to the soldiers. They put a crown of thorns...on his head. Later they took Jesus to the hill called Golgotha and crucified him. Can we imagine the pain? The humiliation? Were these things being done to the Son of God...the Son of the Creator of the Universe? Why did He allow it to happen? What would we have done if we had been there?

Silence

At the end of the day, Jesus was thirsty. That is something we can identify with... After he had been given some sour wine he said "It is finished", and He died...

Silence

When the hour of death comes, will we be able to say with peaceful resignation it is finished? What are we doing to get ready for that hour? Do we avoid thinking about it? Do we look forward to oblivion or resurrection?...

Silence

Lord Jesus Christ, we your humble servants, gathered here at the foot of the cross, beseech you to strengthen our faith and make us instruments of your will. May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. *Amen*

When we recite the Apostles Creed we say we believe that Jesus Christ "was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried..."

These words describe what some have called "the stumbling block of our faith." St. Paul first used the words "stumbling block". He wrote that the essence of God should be invested in a humble man like Jesus of Nazareth, who was executed as a common criminal was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. (1 Cor. 1:23). To some observers it seems downright scandalous that God, the almighty and sovereign ruler of the universe should stoop to such humiliation and agony.

Why would He?

Let's take a moment to recall some moment in our lives when we felt absolutely helpless.

Silence

Perhaps you received a diagnosis that you had some frightening and inoperable disease... or your car went out of control on an icy highway, and you skidded toward a steep embankment...or, as happened to me once, you were in a foreign country and all of your money and credit cards were stolen...or you were accused of a crime that you had no real proof that you did not commit...or someone you loved walked out on you, leaving you alone and miserable...

There are days when human life is like that. They are marked by a feeling of abject helplessness and personal anguish.

I remember being at the bedside of a parishioner who had just died... Her husband stood over her in disbelief. He slapped her face trying to revive her. When she did not respond, it was obvious that the man had never in his life felt more helpless...

In her book called SMOKE SCREEN author Betsy White describes years of anguish in her family when her young son became addicted to drugs and alcohol. Again and again, the family thought the boy had conquered his problems and for a while things would get better, but each time they became worse...The awful part, said Betsy, was the terrible sense of helplessness...As much as she and her husband loved their son, there seemed to be nothing they could do to stop the destruction he was heaping on himself and the rest of the family. They simply could not find the solution.

There are times when such powerlessness seems to be the very essence of human life...times when it seems as if there is absolutely nothing we can do. We feel as helpless as an insect on the head of a pin...

It is here, at this very lowest moment of powerlessness, that we can begin to understand why Christ became like us and joined us in the human predicament. Although, we believe he was God, St. Paul says, "he emptied himself" (Philippians 2:7) of the kingdom, the power, and the glory, and became one of us...

He became a very poor one of us—born into the family of a Galilean carpenter, born in a stable and placed in a manger because there was no room in a Bethlehem inn. Throughout his life, he said, he had "no place to lay his head." He became a servant (literally a slave) says St. Paul. He became not as one who lords it over others, but as one who serves—a menial!...

As our creed states it, he was conceived by the power of the Spirit, born of a Virgin mother, suffered under Pilate, died and was buried. This man who came among us by an unusual mating of the divine and the human (the Spirit of God and the Virgin of Nazareth) suffered unspeakable agony under the Roman Governor and died like a common criminal...

You see, God joins us, not at the point of our greatest strength, not when we are behaving well and achieving great things, but at the point of our lowest weakness, when we are the most helpless, when we can expect nothing and can do nothing... That is the moment when God comes to us...

In Mathew and Mark we read that when Jesus was about to expire, he gave a loud cry. The words echoed through the countryside and have been heard again and again down through the ages. "*Eli, Eli, lema sa bach thani?*"

In that moment of unbearable agony he was shouting what we so often feel in our moments of dereliction, "My God, my God, where are you? Why have you forsaken me?" The hour of Christ's death is one of the holiest moments in Christian recollection; for in it Jesus identified fully with human helplessness and pain.

Silence

No doubt if you and I had been writing this story we would have told it differently. We would describe a God of great power bringing about human salvation by issuing a decree: "Destroy everyone who doesn't measure up. Give peace and fulfillment to everyone who does." If God doesn't take that kind of action, what good is all that power?

But God is God... We cannot describe him; he describes us. He can turn the wisdom of this world into foolishness and the foolishness of this world into wisdom. That is what he did on that first Good Friday.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclama-

tion, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. — 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

God's story is not told in the way you and I would write the script. You see, we are redeemed not by an act of power, but by one of weakness—by one who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. It takes a large measure of faith to believe in such a story. That's why, to this day, most people just don't get it. It calls for a kind of faith that changes our lives and begins to work inside us to transform us into a people who are preparing for the coming of the kingdom.

There is a nice little kingdom story in Katherine Jefferts Schori's recently published book *A WING AND A PRAYER*. (Page 138)

One Sunday morning a man came into a church that was pretty concerned with doing things "decently and in good order." He was a bit aromatic, pretty scruffy looking, with wild hair and no socks. He wandered up the aisle, looking for a place to sit, but the pews were full. He kept going, and finally came up to the very front, and sat down on the floor, right under the pulpit. Everybody else was anxiously looking around, trying to decide what would happen next. One of the ushers, a man in his eighties, most properly dressed in a three-piece suit, came slowly up the aisle. You could hear his cane tapping out every step—no carpet in that church! People began to relax, knowing that he would do what needed to be done. Finally the usher got to the front, set his cane down on the floor, and with great difficulty, lowered himself to the floor to sit next to the stranger, so he wouldn't be all alone up there in front.

Amen.