

GOOD FRIDAY, 2013

Our patron, St. Anselm, provides me with the way to begin this homily. Among the many influential things that he wrote during his lifetime, perhaps no phrase has become better known or more frequently repeated than his concise definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” In itself, this is so clear and concise a definition that one might well ask: Why did it take so many centuries for someone to formulate it? Actually, St. Augustine once wrote something similar, but it didn’t have quite the conciseness of Anselm’s definition. A simple example to illustrate the point might be this: Yesterday evening we celebrated the Mass of the Lord’s Supper and so were especially mindful of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Our faith tells us that the consecrated bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, and to approach the altar with this conviction has been enough to nourish the devotion and promote the holiness of countless Christians down the centuries. But at least some people are not satisfied with affirming the truth that has been handed down to us from the early Church. No, they also want to ask how this might be better understood. Ever since the Middle Ages, the Catholic answer has usually been in terms of transubstantiation, as taught classically by St. Thomas Aquinas. In more recent times, some were not altogether happy with Thomas’s treatment of the question, so they began speaking of the change in the bread and wine in a different way, using terms like “transsignification” or “transfinalization.” These approaches have not gained widespread acceptance, but there is no doubt that they were exercises in theology in the Anselmian sense— attempts to better understand a central point of Catholic faith.

With that background, let’s now consider another phrase, one more appropriate for this afternoon’s service. We just heard an account of Jesus’ passion and death, something we refer to

at every Eucharist, even as on Sundays and solemnities we proclaim explicitly in the Nicene Creed that “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” Most people would probably say that this is an even more central aspect of Christian faith than the affirmation that the consecrated bread and wine are truly the body and blood of Christ, and again countless persons have devoutly affirmed Jesus’ saving death down the centuries and found in this conviction the hope and joy that has always been the hallmark of Christian life when lived at its fullest. From the earliest times, the cross of Christ was proclaimed as a sign of God’s infinite love for each of us. As St. Paul writes in Romans, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Simply accepting this claim is the main thing, but many also feel a deeply human need to reflect on this datum of our faith, to try to understand it more deeply, to ask just what it means to say that Christ died “for us” or “for our sake” or “for our sins.”

The liturgy itself offers a starting point, for it is most appropriate that our first reading every Good Friday is from one of the so-called Servant Songs in the Book of Isaiah, a text that is actually quoted no fewer than seven times in the New Testament, not to mention more than thirty allusions or verbal parallels in either the Gospels or apostolic letters. It was altogether natural for New Testament authors to light upon this passage from the prophet Isaiah, given such verses as “He was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole; by his wounds we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, all following our own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all” (Is 53:5-6). The obvious sense of these and similar verses is that this Servant—whom Christians see as having been realized in the sinless Jesus—in some way took our place, in some way endured the punishment that would otherwise

have fallen upon us because of our own sins and transgressions. This was beautifully phrased in one of Charles Wesley's hymns, of which two stanzas go as follows:

[Christ's] mercy cast a pitying look,

By love unbounded love inclined,

Our guilt and punishment he took,

And died a Victim for mankind.

His blood procured our life and peace,

And quench'd the wrath of hostile Heaven.

Justice gave way to our release,

And God hath all my sins forgiven. [Hymn 36]

I think there is no doubt but that this captures the predominant understanding of what is meant by affirming that Christ suffered and died for us. If it has any drawback, it may be that it leaves us, the recipients of this unbounded mercy, too passive, requiring of us only that we really affirm it to be true. I would therefore like to suggest another approach that has been suggested recently by some theologians, one of whom writes: “[Christ accepted the cross] because we too have to. His was a cross that had always been ours, the one way open to us, in a skewed world,

for putting a stop to the consequences of our own malice without adding to them. Accepting that way, the way of the cross, was an act of solidarity with us and an offer of solidarity with him—an appeal for us to follow him by willingly taking up whatever crosses the world imposes, by making them occasions for joy, by forgiving [any who have wronged us].”¹

I certainly don’t pretend that this is the last word, or even the best word, in the way any of us might reflect on what it means to say that Christ died for us. One might even object that it sounds more like “Christ died as one *with* us” than that he died “*for* us,” but surely the former statement is also true. Where Christ Jesus went, through the gates of death, we too will one day follow. And let us not forget that this is never the last word for a Christian, for it is also a central part of our faith that those gates are openings to a new and fuller life. As Cardinal Jean Daniélou once wrote, “Redemption does not mean some kind of ransom or settling of accounts It means Christ’s conflict with the powers of evil, his victory over them all, and his conquest of the kingdom of death.”² In that conquest, may we too take heart and rejoice.

¹ Charles Hefling, “Why the cross?” *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2013, pp. 26-27.

² Jean Daniéloiu, quoted in *A Word in Season*, II, new ed. (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 2001), 143.