

GOOD FRIDAY

It is surely disconcerting to any of us if we tell some of our friends that something is going to happen and they don't believe us—or perhaps don't even understand what we we're saying. That was regularly the case with Jesus' disciples. Every time he predicted his passion and death, the disciples were incredulous or uncomprehending. For example, just a few weeks ago, on the second Sunday of Lent, we heard the Gospel account of Jesus' transfiguration. Coming down from the mountain, Jesus told Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone what they had seen until he had risen from the dead. About this, one evangelist wrote: "They kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant."

Not only did none of the disciples ever grasp our Lord's prediction of his passion, death, and resurrection; at times they wanted only to have things stay just as they were. Perhaps the best example of this is what we also heard in that account of the transfiguration four Sundays ago. As Jesus was seen conversing with Moses and Elijah, the only thing Peter could manage to express was the wish to make three tents there—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah—so that they could remain right there on the mountaintop. However unrealistic that might sound to us, it does reflect an attitude that can easily affect us all.

Let me give an example: As usual, springtime in Washington is regularly marked by some days that are gray and drizzly, while others are beautiful heralds of spring. The first day of spring this year, March 20, followed the next day by the solemnity of St. Benedict, was truly gorgeous. On both days there was hardly a cloud in the sky, the breeze was mild, the daytime temperature hovered in the low 70s, and the cherry trees on our south lawn were in full blossom, every bit as beautiful as the blossoms at the Tidal Basin but without the crowds of tourists down there. On that first day of spring, I sat for a while on our south lawn,

spontaneously thinking how wonderful it would be if we could have such a beautiful, peaceful scene year round. I even suspect that it is a similar desire to have a scene like that somehow perdure that has long led painters and photographers to capture scenes of snow-covered branches or sunsets over the ocean, a way of trying to make permanent something that the artist knows is itself ephemeral.

To stay with my example, we know, however, that if blossoms were to remain on a tree all year long, the tree would never bear fruit, and never bearing fruit would mean there'd be no seeds to ensure later generations of the same plant. In the plant kingdom, as in so much else on earth, some things have to give way, have to die, so that others may come to be. And this, really, is what in a far more important sense we not only commemorate but actually celebrate during this Paschal Triduum, the holiest days of the entire year. A chant we have recently been singing at Mass sets to music one of the most basic truths that Jesus ever taught: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest."

It was this very insight, applied to his own life, that was behind Jesus' predictions of his suffering and death, and yet those who had been with him for several years didn't understand what he was saying—or maybe they didn't want to understand. Perhaps they are giving us an ancient example of what Elizabeth Kubler-Ross said is a common early reaction to unwelcome news, whether about one's own impending death or that of a loved one: shock/disbelief/denial, gradually giving way to bargaining, guilt, anger, depression, and—ideally at last—acceptance and hope.

Those who reach acceptance are the truest followers of Jesus, who said that his very food was his Father's will, a will that out of the Son's death would come new life. That's why—despite what we may have thought as children—Easter and

not Christmas is the greatest feast of the Church's year. But we can get to that feast only by way of Good Friday. All this was adumbrated in one of our weekday readings near the end of Lent, from the Book of Wisdom, which described the wicked talking among themselves about one who claimed that God was his Father. Of such a person, the wicked said: "Let us see if his words be true, for if the just one be a son of God, God will defend him.... Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for according to his own words, God will take care of him." But the sacred author concluded: "These were their thoughts, but they erred, for their wickedness blinded them, and they knew not the hidden counsels of God, neither did they count on a recompense of holiness ... or the innocent souls' reward." Isaiah saw this even earlier, words that we just heard: "It was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured.... We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way, but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all."

Our second reading today, from the Letter to the Hebrews, almost perfectly reflects what is found in those Old Testament passages. The New Testament author wrote: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." What that tells us is that everything Jesus went through on that first Good Friday was really for all of us. It's the realization of this totally undeserved gift that has made deep peace and joy the mark of the disciples of Jesus ever since, for they—and let us also be bold enough to say "we"—we realize that things are not what they seem to be at first sight. It seemed that what happened on Golgotha was the end—most of the disciples so feared that to be the case that they had fled—but it was really a beginning, the birth of a movement and a Church that, for all its failings, continues to proclaim as its Lord one who was already reigning in glory upon the cross, for when he was lifted up, he drew us all to himself. For that great gift, we give praise and thanks to God.