

PALM SUNDAY – March 28, 2010

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Have you ever reached a point in your life when you think: ‘this is the absolute rock-bottom; it can’t get any worse than this’? Maybe you lost your job, or you hear that dreaded ‘c’ word (cancer) from your doctor, or your child rejects you and everything you hold dear, or you have to suffer the grief of losing your spouse or parent or child or other loved one to death. Or on a larger scale we see:

--our laws still allow our unborn children to be sacrificed to the deadly, false god of ‘choice’; or

--hundreds of thousands are killed, injured or made homeless by a huge earthquake in Haiti; or

--our Church continues to be shamed by the horrible sins of some priests and religious against the innocence of young people and the failure of some bishops to respond as they should have. Now, the Church in Ireland and other European countries is forced to confront these scandals as the Church in the United States and in our own archdiocese has had to do for the past several years. We see or hear or experience these or other tragedies on any scale, and it is no wonder that we are tempted to think: ‘this is the worst; things can’t possibly get any worse.’

These and other such calamities, whether coming from the forces of nature or from human evil and sin, are undeniably awful. The pain we experience from them should never be minimized or trivialized. But this Palm Sunday and the events we solemnly commemorate this Holy Week remind us that they are not the worst. The very worst of all, beyond which it is not even possible to imagine, took place on a barren hill called Golgotha (the place of the Skull). Jesus, the Son of God, was literally nailed, hands and feet, to a wooden cross to die a hideously and sadistically slow and painful death. St. Paul sets the stage for us in the second reading: “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself...coming in human likeness...he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” This is the essence of the Christian faith: Jesus, the eternal word of the Father, became one of us so he could die for us. This past Thursday we celebrated the feast of the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary God’s plan for her to conceive and give birth to this Savior. What began in Nazareth comes to its climax at Calvary—if Jesus had not died on the cross, we would have no reason whatsoever to celebrate his birth at Christmas or his conception in Mary’s womb.

It was all so grossly unfair. Jesus was the essence of goodness, of love, of mercy and compassion. He came to call mankind back to the Father’s reconciling love because, as we will hear from Isaiah on Good Friday, “we had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way.” He performed miracles of love: feeding thousands with a few loaves and fish, healing the sick, calming fierce storms, raising the dead to life again. Even from the cross, he prayed that his heavenly Father would forgive his executioners—even there, Jesus’ perfection of goodness and holiness shone through like a light in the satanic darkness of that Friday afternoon.

No, nothing is worse, nothing could possibly be worse, than the torture and execution of Jesus of Nazareth and the son of Mary, she who saw every single indignity inflicted on her Son. It can’t get worse than this. And, in a most mysterious and miraculous way, it is precisely in that utter awfulness of Calvary that we find our hope, our consolation, our strength and yes—even our joy. Jesus endured all this, but he was not defeated by it all—he won the battle. Yes, he died and was buried, but that grave could not hold him prisoner for long. Next Sunday we will celebrate with great joy his victory over death—but we are not there yet.

We can simply take heart in knowing that whatever personal or other tragedies we have to endure on whatever level from whatever source, it is nothing worse than what Jesus Christ has already endured. Because Jesus endured and prevailed over the worst that the world could do to him, he will surely help us who turn to him for strength in carrying our own crosses. Jesus has already been there; he has already

done that. And that is why, again from St. Paul: “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”