

**Good Friday – Year A – April 22, 2011 - Homily**  
**Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

As I was preparing today's homily, my mind kept flashing back to the series of incredibly powerful images from *The Return of the King*, which is the final movie in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Back and forth, the scene shifts, from the relative calm of a mostly deserted castle, to the battle that rages against the evil forces just across the river. In fact, the castle holds only two occupants, the hobbit, Pippin, and the insane steward of the land. Pippin is ordered to sing as the steward dines quite casually, while the battle rages. Pippin sings a song of lament. As we listen to the mournful song, the camera moves to steward tearing meat off a bone and eating it. We watch as a trickle of red juice escape his mouth as he bites into a ripe tomato. Pippin looks on, deeply grieved, disgusted, but also frightened for his own life. At each verse of his lament, the scene shifts, puncturing the calm music with images of the steward's only surviving son and his army being brutally slain by the evil forces waged against them. The pictures convey a deep congruity with how we feel today as we hear the story of Jesus' betrayal, brutal treatment, crucifixion, and death on the cross. Where is God in this frightening mix of evil, violence, and death?

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" sings the Psalmist. In both Matthew and Mark's accounts of Jesus' passion, Jesus speaks these words from the cross. As in all allusions to Hebrew Scriptures, a few lines are enough to bring to mind the entire reading, and direct us to reflect on the whole text. In this case, the Gospel accounts testify that Jesus prays Psalm 22 as He hangs in bitter agony on the cross, abandoned by almost all His disciples, and apparently powerless. Throughout His life, Jesus has consistently reinterpreted Torah to offer God's perspective on the message and meaning of Scripture. Even on the cross, He continues to teach us. What then might Jesus be helping us to understand from Psalm 22, which is embodied so clearly in His passion. How is our crucified Lord speaking from the cross to the depths of our own frightened, perhaps shame-filled, or even despairing hearts? What is Jesus' lament for us and for Himself?

There is no doubt that this song of lament is a bold, insistent and directed prayer to God, with a demand for God's response, as well as a kind of twist turning woe into praise to God. Even when we feel abandoned by all around us, God is always with us, and ultimately God is our deliverer, our savior, and our redeemer from all suffering in this life. The words of the Psalm lift up the gritty reality of suffering and affliction, to the One in whom the Psalmist trusts for deliverance. For Jesus, that is God the Father. In our own times of physical suffering, emotional pain, or deep anguish, Jesus' words from the cross draw us back to the source of all life and love, all compassion and mercy – who is God, in whom we put our faith and trust. The words of the Psalm are relational and experiential. As Jesus' last prayer, the Psalm expresses the relationships between Jesus and God the Father; Jesus and others, including His accusers; and Jesus as He understands His own identity as God the Son, fully human, and fully divine.

Jesus is constantly in prayer with God the Father, and that is His example for each of us to emulate. Jesus accepts the rejection of His people, and the injustice of His death, trusting in the intimate relationship He maintains with God, and knowing that God will redeem this suffering for the deliverance of people yet unborn. Jesus continues to proclaim the praises of God to His brothers and sisters. Again, He speaks of God's reversal of worldly standards. The one who is scorned and spit upon is loved and heard by God. As for Jesus' understanding of His own identity,

we can only know that Jesus' life fulfills the words of the prophets, that He is obedient to God's will, even to death on a cross; and that the divine voice confirms that He is the beloved, God's Son. Everyone is invited to look and really see, to listen and really hear Jesus' work in the world, His story and teaching, so that we can make up our own minds to choose Jesus. The Psalm does have a reference to Jesus' self-proclaimed mission, as it says, "The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever!" You and I are also invited to explore our own sense of relationship with God, with others, and with Jesus, our Lord and Savior through the words of this Psalm.

For Jesus and for us, when we cry out the first line of the Psalm, we are not crying into a void, but calling to our dearest friend, God the Father. Jesus knows that the power to sustain Him in this terrible moment as He takes upon Himself the sins of the world, and dies so that we might live rests in God the Father. By the end of the Psalm, Jesus is confident in the prophetic words that He will stand in the community of the faithful with a testimony of God's deliverance so powerful that all will praise God. His deliverance – our deliverance – restores hope, and generations to come will love and serve the Lord. When the world turns away from the shameful humiliation of the cross, which manifests itself in many different ways even today, God turns towards us with mercy and compassion, and He listens to all who cry to Him. Quite a few of us know what it feels like to be abandoned, or powerless in our lives, to be so overwhelmed by circumstances that all we can do is cry out to God just as the Psalmist and Jesus do. We want to know "why" and only God can answer that question. Jesus' cry comes from the depths of loneliness, but He knows He is not alone. Our own prayers often come from the blackest times in our lives, and the darkest regions of our hearts, but we too know that we are not alone. God is always with us. We may be helpless at times, but in faith, we are never hopeless. All our pain and suffering can be lifted up to God, and God will not turn away from our prayers. He will always give us the help and strength, courage and peace we need to bear the burdens of our lives.

Even on this dark day, Jesus teaches us from the cross, encouraging us to trust in God, to deepen our relationship with Him, and with others. In the midst of the most profound suffering any human being has ever endured, when we hide our eyes from the cross and think that the world is abandoned by God and filled with injustice, Jesus nonetheless claims the reality of God's grace and goodness. He proclaims God's steadfast love, God's justice and redemption, and God's deliverance from all evil. The Psalm holds in tension both fear and faith, hurt and hope, inviting us to worship God at all times, and in all circumstances. As an example for us all, at a time of profound loss, deepest pain, and in greatest breadth of humiliation possible, Jesus prays to God the Father. There is nothing in our lives that God will not forgive, redeem and heal, if we turn to Him. In the words of Charlotte Elliott and the hymn, *Just as I am* (Hymnal 1982 #693). "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bid'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come." Even as we wait now in silence and emptiness, helpless and powerless for God to come, according His promise, we come to Him in prayer, just as we are.

Amen.