

GOOD FRIDAY HOMILY– 2010

St. Mary's Church

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It's big. It's less than ten years old. It's controversial. It's nestled in Orlando, Florida, elbow to elbow with some of the most famous theme parks in the world. Just down the street you can find Walt Disney World, EPCOT, and the Magic Kingdom.

But a few years ago, Orlando got another theme park. It's big. It's controversial. And it's called, "The Holy Land Experience." There, on 15 acres, for \$17 per person, tourists have a chance to see the recreation of 3000 years of Bible history.

Many visitors are overwhelmed with religious sentiment. Others find it to be – tacky. For instance, one visitor reported that after they had paid their fee and walked thru the "Jerusalem Gate," they were met by an employee dressed like an ancient Israelite, who greeted them in her southern accent by saying, "Shalom Y'all!"

Like most theme parks, The Holy Land Experience is divided into special sections, or 'lands.' There is the "Dead Sea Scroll" land, where you can see a reproduction of the cave where the scrolls were found. There is "Ten Commandments Land," where you can view a 25 minute show, with a big finale including fog and laser lights as God speaks. Then there is the Garden Tomb, where the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are portrayed in the style of a Broadway musical. There are 6 shows per day at the Garden Tomb.

And, if you get hungry, you can stop by the Oasis Palms Café, where you can order such things as the Goliath Ground Beef burger, or Pharisees French Fries.

Shortly after the Holy Land Experience opened, the New York Times sent a reporter to interview the tourists. She spoke to one woman, who had sat all day beneath a tree, watching the 6 daily re-enactments of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. The reporter asked her, "Why did you stay put and watch the same thing over and over again?" And the woman responded, "It was so nice to be able to sit back and watch what happened to Jesus."

It was so nice to be able to sit back and watch what happened to Jesus....

That kind of tourist mentality might be fine for a theme park in the middle of Orlando, but it won't work for us tonight in the middle of a liturgy in the west end of Richmond. We are NOT tourists here. We have not come to this liturgy so that we can sit back and watch what happened to Jesus 2000 years ago. We are not here to witness a stage show or historical drama. We are not tourists here.

We are not tourists, because what happened to Jesus happens to us!

The cross is not a once and done event of history. The cross happens every day. Calvary is not a single geographical location, restaged in Orlando. Every one of us has been (or will be!) to Calvary. We've all carried the cross. We've all felt the wounds. How can I be so bold as to say that? Well, think about it. What happened on Calvary? Love was crucified. Love was crucified. And if you are honest, I'll bet that, in some way, YOUR love has been crucified in the past year. We are not tourists here! The crucifixion happens to us.

It happens to us:

- + when depression and mental illness steal your joy, your energy, your life.
- + when cancer or AIDS or chronic illness sap your strength and leave you fearful.
- + when old age brings the death of many friends.
- + when you don't get into that graduate program you wanted, when you don't get the scholarship you wanted, when you don't get the summer job you wanted.
- + when you experience hatred because of the color of your skin, or your accent, or your sexual orientation.
- + when you are abused by someone you trusted
- + when someone you love walks away, and says, "I don't love you any more"
- + when addiction ensnares your freedom
- + when the workplace or dorm becomes a place of conflict
- + when schools, mosques and churches get blown up by terrorists, when young soldiers must face conflict on blood-stained fields, when civilians get caught in the cross-fire.

I have seen love crucified –

- +when a poor mother cannot feed her children
- + when a student becomes overwhelmed with worry
- + when a parents gets Alzheimers
- + when a friend dies too soon

We are NOT tourists here. What happened to Jesus happens to us. Sometimes, the cross is handed to us quite unexpectedly. We don't see it coming, and we don't know why it came. At other times, Jesus INVITES us to pick up the cross voluntarily, to take on the suffering out of our own free will. That happens too:

- + when you decide to do the right thing, knowing that your peers will mock you
- + when you give your life to the service of others, knowing that family and friends will not understand
- +when you defend the dignity of human life, upholding the value of the unborn, denouncing executions, rejecting the utilitarian killing of the elderly –you stand against such things, knowing that there is a price to pay.
- + when you choose to live with integrity at home, at school, in your work, knowing that your integrity will bring you the resistance of others.

Christ's Calvary is our Calvary. Christ's cross is our cross. His crucified love is in our hearts. His wounds are our wounds. We are not tourists here – his story is ours. We don't come here to watch what happened to HIM – we come here so that Christ can give meaning to what happens to us. The cross is real in every human life, but – at least in my experience – the only way to find hope in the midst of suffering is to stand on top of Calvary with Jesus, and to view our lives, our world, from his perspective.

He is with us. Jesus embraced every possible human suffering, so that we could know that we never suffer alone. Our suffering tells us that something has gone terribly wrong in the world. It is not as it should be. We often find ourselves far from God. Something is wrong – and someone had to set it right. We get lost – but someone came and found us. We are far away – someone was willing to slog through every valley, every heartbreak, every tragedy of the human landscape in order to take us home. Sin pinned Jesus to that tree on Calvary. So we cannot be tourists. What happens to Jesus, happens to us. And what happened to Jesus, happened BECAUSE of us.

Later in this liturgy, we will all come forward as a community, and we will kiss the cross. This is a most jarring and raw liturgical action. If non-Christians walked in and saw us doing this, they might conclude that we are crazy. We are a group of people who will publicly come forward and kiss the instrument on which Jesus was executed.

Why do we do such a thing? We kiss the cross because we are grateful that Jesus, who IS God's love, was willing to be crucified, willing to embrace all that the human heart is vulnerable to. We kiss the cross because we know that the story does NOT end here. Jesus keeps saying to his disciples – to us – 'follow me.' Follow me to Calvary. Follow me to the cross. Follow me into the heart of darkness. I'll be there with you.

But if we follow him on Friday, then we will also be with him on Sunday - where death gives way to life, where tragedy yields to triumph, where the cross is shattered by the stone which has been rolled away. If we are with Jesus in his dying, then we will – with certainty – be with him in his risingwhere tombs go empty, where hearts are mended, where lives find fulfillment, where life is eternal, and love never fails.

May the Lord be praised now and forever.