

WHAT MAKES GOOD FRIDAY GOOD?

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Rom.1:16; 1 Cor. 1:22,23

One of the great mysteries to non-Christian people is that we, who claim to be Christians and assert our devotion to Jesus Christ, can celebrate the anniversary of His execution with a sense of solemn gladness.

The last days of all other religious leaders are marked with sadness. The death of Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed and the others were tragic occasions filled with feelings of calamity. And nothing in history has occurred to change the forlorn attitude of their disciples.

But Friday, the day tradition has established as the time of Jesus' crucifixion, is not called black. Or dark. Or crucifixion Friday. Rather, we know it as Good Friday. Of course, we do not enter into it with a shallow casualness which borders on disrespect. It is not a time for giddy gaiety or flippant feasting. But neither is it a time for tears and mourning. It is, in every sense, good. For it marks the turning point of history. Good Friday has become the corner post from which the hinge of history is hung. Time divides itself by that day and we number our years as AD—after death—beginning with the day upon which Jesus died.

What makes Good Friday good? Why should we Christians approach this occasion with a sense of solemn gladness rather than the traditional sadness one would expect on the anniversary of the death of One we claim to love?

It seems to me Good Friday is good because it marks the beginning of

The Triumph of Love Over Hate.

It was a cruel and savage world 2000 years ago. Life was cheap and the dignity of man was a tragic mockery. And yet, into that world so filled with hate and hopelessness, came the cross of

Jesus Christ with its revolutionary message of love and forgiveness.

It did not win a quick and easy victory. In fact, there are many areas of life in which the warfare still rages on with a fierceness which makes one shudder. If we were to focus our attention upon those regions, we might very well feel the cause of righteousness was lost.

But standing off and taking the long view of history, we can see how, with ever increasing sureness, the power of love is conquering the power of hate.

To begin with, the progress was slow. Hatred and malice are not easily put down. The first signs of change were slight. But little by little, this new doctrine of love and forgiveness won its way.

As someone has said,

“The cross tempered cruelty on the battlefield. It added mercy to justice in the courts of kings. It brought compassion to the orphaned, the aged, the needy, and the unfortunate. It caused people everywhere to think in terms of brotherhood and began the long process of transforming the beastly qualities of people into the virtues of kindness and compassion.”

No more graphic evidence of the change which the cross has wrought in the affairs of people is to be found than in the treatment given the Japanese by our nation after WWII.

Americans have made many mistakes and we have been reminded of them often. But this is one act of Christian love which everyone of us can point to with a feeling of pride. It is one of America's shining hours. Instead of forcing the conquered people of Japan to grovel in the dirt as conquerors throughout all history were want to do, America refused any reparations. She turned her back upon any suggestion of making Japan a social and economic slave. Instead, she set about the great task of rebuilding a broken nation. The U.S. poured millions and millions of

dollars into Japan's shattered industry so that the wheels of production, which had ground out implements of war, could begin to produce those items which would make life better for the very people who had wantonly and viciously attacked us.

This was the first time in history that a conquering nation had so treated its victims. That fantastic act of Christian love, unparalleled in the affairs of mankind, had its birth on Good Friday nearly 2000 years ago when the power of love defeated the power of hate.

The paradox of the cross is this. While it is the crowning proof of mankind's corruption, it is also the crowning proof of God's compassion. While it is the world's darkest midnight, it is also the world's brightest hope. While it reveals the blackness of sin, it also reveals the sunlight of salvation. While it is the culmination of the revelation of the hatred of men for God, it is also the culmination of the revelation of the love of God for man.

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34) was the cry which rung down the curtain on hatred's conquest. It proved that hell hath no fury that heaven cannot heal. It demonstrated, for time and for eternity, that the power of love is greater than the power of hate.

During our preaching tour of Europe, we spent seven days in Berlin. While there, we stayed in one of the great hospitals owned and operated by the German Baptists. Dr. Jacob Meister, leader of the German Baptists and our interpreter while we were in Berlin, told us how, following the fall of Hitler, the Russians were given initial access to Berlin. Like animals, they literally turned everything upside down. The hospital, itself, was a shambles. Except for one item—a large wooden cross which stood in a niche in the corner of the hospital lobby—everything was in disarray. But around the base of the cross was a ring of candles which were kept burning night and day. In front of the cross lay a battered, old Russian bible opened to Luke 23. One verse had been crudely underlined. It was the verse which read:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

That's what makes Good Friday good. It sparked the spirit of forgiveness. It marked the beginning of the triumph of the cross over chaos. It demonstrated for all to see that the power of love is greater than the power of hate. Again, Good Friday is good because it marked --

The Triumph of God's Grace Over Man's Sin.

The word "grace" is not as familiar to Christians today as it was to those who lived in generations past. Nevertheless, it is one of the great words of the Christian faith. Included in its meaning are such things as beauty, mercy, strength, and peace.

President MacKay of Princeton University has said,

"Grace is unmerited favor."

It is the divine mercy which God bestows upon men, not because they are deserving, but in spite of the fact they are not deserving. It is unmerited favor. It is something which God does, not because He has to, but because He wants to. Because He can look beyond the wall of rebellion people build around themselves and see within every sinner the possibility of a saint.

One day, the famous sculptor Michelangelo was asked why he had chosen a particular piece of marble to work upon. It was unusually grotesque. He answered:

"There's an angel in there and I must set it free."

He had a vision of what that twisted piece of stone could become and, by an act of grace, put himself to the task of making it what it ought to be.

That's what God did at the cross. And that's what God is doing through the cross. He looks down into our sinful hearts and says

"There's an angel in there and I must set it free!"

By an act of grace, an act of unmerited favor, He puts Himself to the task of making us what we ought to be.

Many of us are quick to say, "I don't see too much wrong with me as I am. What's all the

excitement about?" The difficulty lies in the fact that we have failed to see our sin in the proper context. A bit of mud may seem rather insignificant until it's splashed upon a beautiful, new, white dress. Then it is a disaster. A bit of doodling may be rather unimportant until it's done on a Rembrandt masterpiece. Then it becomes a catastrophe. Likewise, our sin seems insignificant, hardly anything to get excited about, until we catch a glimpse of what it has done to God. Then we begin to understand the real dreadfulness of sin.

When Saul Kane in Masfield's Everlasting Mercy had his eyes opened, he suddenly saw,

"The harm I had done in being me."

And that's it! When we see, not merely that we have been out of harmony with ourself, but out of harmony with God. When we realize our actions have not only infected the lives of others but have injured God and turned a corner of heaven into a little bit of hell, *then* we begin to feel like the sinner we really are.

f

Someone has said,

"The blackest thing in the world is the heart of one who has been touched by death as a result of sin. The reddest thing in the world is human blood. The whitest thing in the world is new driven snow. The greatest thing in the world is love."

Do you know what makes Good Friday good? I'll tell you. It's because on that fateful day --

"God, filled with the greatest thing in the world, took the reddest thing in the world, applied it to the blackest thing in the world, and made it the whitest thing in all the universe, a human soul cleansed by the blood of Christ."

By an act of unmerited favor, He made atonement for our sins. He loosed the angel imprisoned within our stony hearts and made it possible for us to be recreated in the image of Christ. And thus it's possible, through faith in Jesus, for us to stand before Him, robed in righteousness, not by any act of ours, but by an act of grace which has conquered all our sin.

“Marvelous grace of our loving Lord
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt
Yonder on Calvary's Mount out poured
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

“Dark is the stain that we cannot hide
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide
Whiter than snow you may be today.
“Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace
Freely bestowed on all who believe
You who are longing to see His face
Will you this moment His grace receive?

“Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within
Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that is greater than all our sin.”

Finally may I say Good Friday is good because through the faithfulness of God, there is the promise of --

Triumph Over Present Defeats.

Good Friday is the open door to Easter dawn. In this month's issue of Guideposts, there is a lovely story which some of you may have seen. Let me read it to you.

“It was a beautiful spring day, and a sense of peace stayed with me as I left the cathedral on Easter Monday morning. I paused for a moment on top of the steps leading to the Avenue, now crowded with people rushing to their jobs. Sitting in her usual place inside a small archway was the old flower lady. At her feet,

corsages and boutonnieres were parading on top of a spread-open newspaper.

“The flower lady was smiling, her wrinkled old face alive with some inner joy. I started down the stairs, then, on an impulse, turned and picked out a flower. As I put it in my lapel, I said, ‘You look happy this morning.’ ‘Why not? Everything is good.’

“She was dressed so shabbily and seemed so very old that her reply startled me. ‘You’ve been sitting here for many years now, haven’t you? And always smiling. You wear your troubles well.’

“‘You can’t reach my age and not have troubles’, she replied. ‘Only it’s like Jesus and Good Friday,’ she paused for a moment. ‘Yes?’ I prompted. “‘Well, when Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, that was the worst day in the whole world. And when I get troubles, I remember that and then I think of what happened only three days later. Easter and our Lord arising. So when I get troubles, I have learned to wait three days. Somehow everything gets alright again.’”
And she smiled good-bye. Her words still follow me whenever I think I have troubles.

“Give God a chance to help. Wait three days.”

This world of ours is terribly impersonal. The people about us are rather indifferent to our trials. There is something prophetic in the truism

“Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone.”

We human beings are so occupied with our own struggles we have very little time or thought for others. The reason Good Friday is good is that it stands at the very heart of history towering above all the puny problems of people as a symbol of the faithfulness of God.

If God could take what seemed, for the moment, to be His great defeat and turn it into the triumph of Easter, then you can press through your struggle with absolute assurance that there is nothing that can happen to you which you and God cannot handle together.

What makes Good Friday good? I'll tell you:

It marks the beginning of the triumph of love over hate.

It marks the triumph of God's grace over man's sin.

It provides the promise of triumph over present defeats.

There is so much truth in this little poem by Jessie Wiseman Gibbs.

“If we believed in God, there would be light

Upon our pathway on the darkest night.

If we believed in God, there would be power

To foil the tempter in the sorest hour.

If we believed in God, there would be peace

In this world's affair, ever to increase.

If we believed in God, there would be joy

Even in tears, that nothing could destroy.

If we believed in God, there would be love

To heal all wounds and lift the world above.

Lord Christ, be near us, that, beholding Thee,

We may believe in God and be set free!”