

Homily for March 28, 2010 (Passion/Palm Sunday, Year C)  
St. Augustine & St. Monica Parish, Detroit  
*Isaiah 50:-4-7; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:1-23:56*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh...Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble!  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

That words of that African-American spiritual came to my mind and heart several weeks ago as I read the cover story in a recent issue of *The Economist* magazine (March 6-12). The article was entitled, “Gendercide: What Happened to 100 Million Baby Girls?” It opened with a description of a visit that the Chinese writer Xinran Xue made to a poor family in a rural province of that vast country.

She had just sat down in the kitchen as the woman of the house was giving birth. There was a moan of pain, a series of loud cries, and then silence...followed by a low sobbing sound. The author then heard a male voice brusquely mutter, “Useless thing!”

Then Xinran Xue heard some movement in the slop pail that had been placed behind her. To her shock, she saw a tiny foot poking out of the pail. She started to get up to reach it, but two policemen who had accompanied her to the house held her down and told her, “Don’t move, you can’t save it, it’s too late.”

She protested, “But that’s...murder...and you’re the police!” Then the little foot stopped moving. Xinran Xue objected, “That’s a living child!”

But an older woman came over to her and tried to comfort her. “It’s not a child,” she said, “It’s a girl baby, and we can’t keep it. Around these parts, you can’t get by without a son. Girl babies don’t count.”

Tragically, this is a story that could be told not only in China but in India, South Korea, Bosnia, Belarus, and too many other nations of the world, especially in Asia and Eastern Europe. Girls by the millions are aborted, neglected, exposed, and killed because they are perceived as not as valuable as boys. In many of these same countries, this discrimination persists throughout women’s lives and is manifested in the destruction of girls’ schools, so-called “honor killings,” and the denial of the most basic civil and human rights.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” the old spiritual plaintively asks. As people of faith who believe in the sacredness of human life from conception until natural death, in the fundamental dignity and equality of each human being, and that God made us male and female in God’s own image and likeness, we can only answer, “Yes” when we think of that little girl in China whose life on earth was ended as soon as it began.

We can only answer “Yes” when we see the mangled bodies and limbs of people in Iraq and Afghanistan who are the victims of terrorist bombings. We must answer “Yes” when we read of yet another young man in Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, or any other major city in our own country whose life has been cut short by a bullet—a story now so familiar that it is no longer front page news. We can only answer “Yes” when we hear of a man like Congressman John Lewis—who nearly gave his life to the civil rights struggle—subjected to insults and racial slurs not on the streets of Birmingham or Selma in the 1960’s but in front of the U.S. Capitol last weekend as he prepared to vote on the healthcare bill.

The Passion of Christ is not a past event only. It is all around us, every day, not only in the events that make headlines but also in our personal and family struggles: sickness and sadness; poverty and pettiness; dysfunction and divorce; and when the bills are piling up and the money’s running short—all those times when, like Jesus on the cross, we feel like crying out in the words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

The horrors and pain of the cross might cause us to forget that the greatest power of the Lord’s Passion is not in suffering and pain but rather in *love*. It is the *love* of God—beheld in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus—that we celebrate today and will celebrate in a very special way in the coming week.

It was *love* that enabled Jesus, in the words of St. Paul in our second reading, to disregard grasping for equality with God and instead to empty himself and take “the form of a slave.” It was in *love* that he humbled himself and became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” This is the love that we celebrate when—following the command and example of Jesus—we share in the unleavened bread and wine that are his body and blood.

On this Palm Sunday—*Passion* Sunday—can we accept that love, and are we willing to live out its consequences? Today we are called again to walk with Jesus as disciples and servants with:

- *Well-trained tongues*—Through prayer, reflection, and a growing knowledge of the Bible and our Catholic tradition, to be able to “speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.”
- *Strong backs*—Willing to help our sisters and brothers, especially those who are poor, marginalized and vulnerable, to carry their burdens.
- *Flinty faces*—Able to deal with the misunderstanding, opposition, and even the persecution that sometimes comes from fidelity to the Gospel.
- *Emptied selves*—Ready to grow in holiness and usefulness to God by letting go of our sins—especially the deadly sins of pride, anger, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, and laziness.

As we begin this Holy Week, may the Passion of the Lord be our passion, too. +