

As some people here know, I've recently made my second trip to urgent care. This one was distinctly shorter than the previous one, as when I was first there and they said to me, "What level of pain have you?" I played it down. I said, "Well, I don't know, about one." I was there hours. This time, when they said, "What pain are you in?" I said, "Oh, four and a half." I was seen much quicker.

If I'd really wanted to ratchet it up and say that my pain was as high as it could possibly be, maybe I'd say the pain was excruciating. And I'd be using then a Good Friday word, because excruciate comes from the Latin, *ex cruce*, out of the cross. The Latin-speaking Romans went out of their way to come up with the most vile form of execution ever invented. There was nothing worse. It literally was excruciating.

This was the form of death meted out to Jesus on that first Good Friday. I want to focus on the fact briefly now that what we remember today isn't just the death of Jesus. We're also called to remember the manner of his death. I've just given a class, a Christian formation series. The title was *Why Did Jesus Die?* Perhaps a better question to ask, certainly one more in keeping with the New Testament, would have been: *Why was Jesus crucified?* Because in the new Testament we see that the manner of Jesus' death is constantly emphasized.

St. Paul announced to the Corinthians, "We preach Christ crucified." All four Gospels dwell in detail on the manner of Jesus' death. The manner of his death is clearly significant. That's the idea I want to explore. The fact that the cross came after several centuries to be adopted as the main Christian symbol hides the fact that it is the most irreligious object ever to find its way into the heart of a faith.

Fleming Rutledge calls the cross irreligious because no human beings, either individually or collectively, would have projected their hopes, wishes, longings onto a crucified man. Those who are crucified do not die a noble death. It's designed not just to kill somebody but to shame and degrade them.

On Good Friday we often focus on the physical pain of crucifixion. But, actually, as we've just heard in that Gospel, and all the Gospel stories, that isn't the emphasis on the Gospel readings. They are more aware, as is the Old Testament readings that we've heard leading up to it from Isaiah, not just on the physical pain that Jesus endured, but on the rejection and the shame that's involved in his death.

As Joel Green says, "Executed publicly, situated at a major crossroads, devoid of clothing, left to be eaten by birds and beasts, victims of crucifixion were subject to optimal, unmitigated, vicious ridicule." No Roman citizen was ever crucified. It was reserved for the lowest of the low and to rob them of any dignity that they had.

That's why it was much harder for the early church to come to grips with the crucifixion than it is in our day, where we've got used to the centrality of the crucifixion over the centuries. We're less aware of the shame and degradation that was involved in the cross.

When St. Paul says to the Corinthians, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," he's saying that because lots of people around him, even some in the church, were saying, "Well you should be ashamed. We are ashamed that our savior died in this way." Many would have said, "How can you possibly worship someone who was so degraded, who was stripped of everything?"

But St. Paul recognized that the stripping away of everything that Jesus had was part of the message. That's why he says that Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. You see, it's not just that he died that was important. It's that he was prepared to suffer even death on a cross. It's significant to St. Paul that Jesus was crucified as no other form of execution would have been commensurate with the extremity of humanity's condition under sin.

Jesus went to the farthest, most godless, most godforsaken place in order to redeem us. He was stripped of everything in order that God may be most clearly revealed in an apparently godless place.

This Good Friday, we kneel before the cross once more. I invite you to respond again to the savior from whom everything was stripped. Let's respond by thinking about what needs to be stripped away from our own lives. The nakedness of Jesus on the cross highlights our own love of hiding behind masks and costumes. All of that has to go. The religiosity with which we like to surround ourselves, that too needs to be stripped away. The hardest thing to forgive is the sin of self-deception, as the self-deceived do not know the radical need of God's forgiveness.

As long as we put up fronts, pretending to be what we're not, then no progress can be made with us. But if we permit the coverings to be stripped away and allow ourselves to be seen in our spiritual nakedness and vulnerability, then everything becomes possible again.

Miraculously we discover that no one is ever taken in by our pretense, certainly not God who died for us whilst we were yet sinners. The love so evident on the cross gives us the confidence to be honest in the confession of our sins. When everything is admitted and nothing is concealed, fast upon that stripping can come forgiveness and acceptance, the coming of grace which comes with the cry for mercy.

Amen.