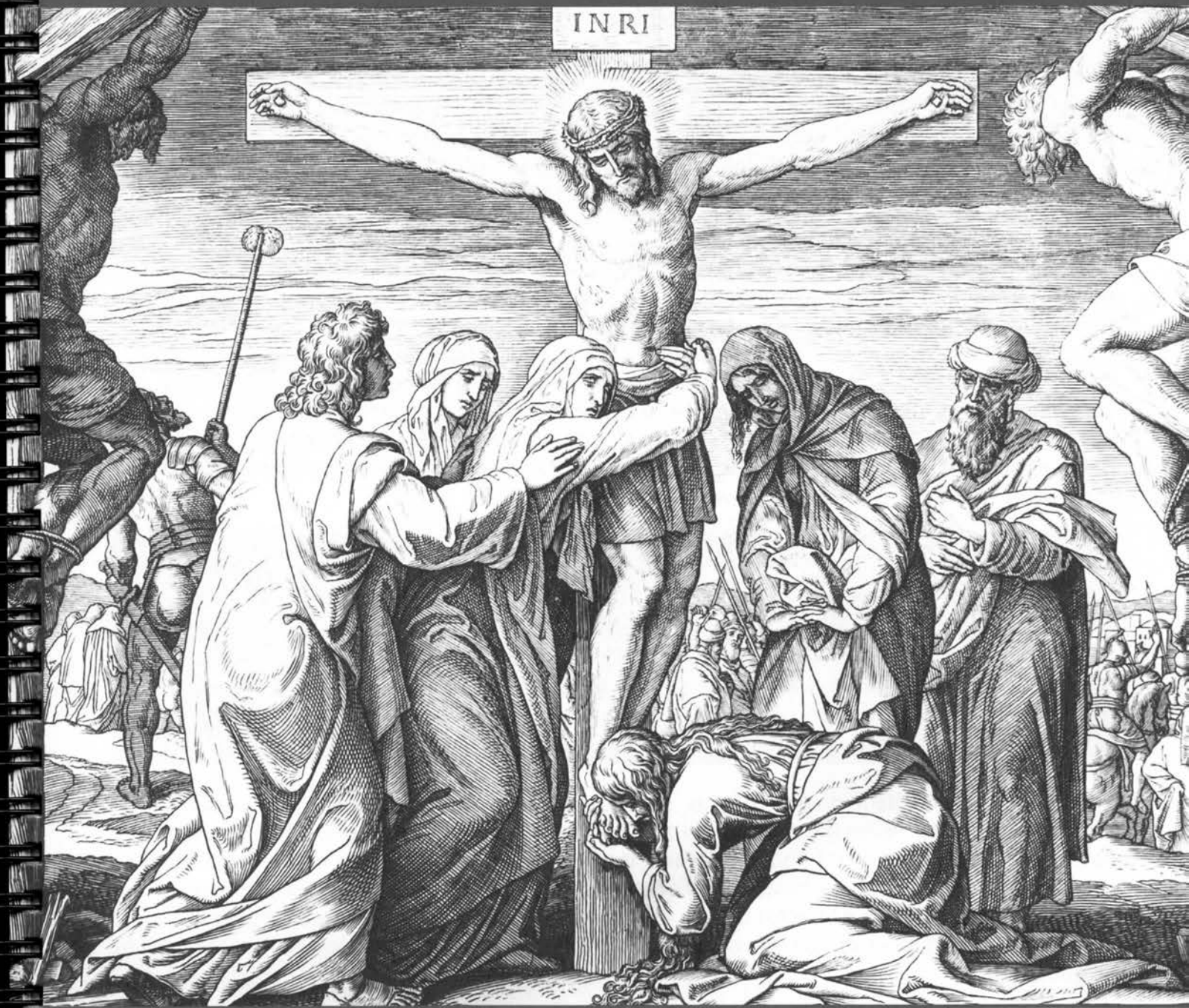


Session Eight: Jesus – Crucified Savior

And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

Colossians 2:13-15



Session Eight: Jesus – Crucified Savior

HOW HAS JESUS RECONCILED US TO THE FATHER?

Session Introduction

When St. Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth explaining his mission among them, he told them: “When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:1-2). Paul places the crucifixion at the very heart of the mission and message of Jesus. We can see the same emphasis in all the Gospels. While the evangelists present the whole life of Christ, especially the three years of his ministry, Matthew devotes a full quarter of his Gospel to the one week that deals with the events surrounding the crucifixion. John gives even more of his writing, a third of his Gospel, to the same event. There is a good reason why Catholics put crucifixes everywhere. It is the supreme sign of our faith.

It is evident from the words and actions of Jesus that he intended to go to the Cross. This was not an accidental event, something that just happened to occur. It was with the crucifixion in mind that God became a man in the first place. It was never far from the mind of Jesus: he regularly predicted it, he knew it was coming, and he “set his face” toward Jerusalem when the proper time had come. Why was this? What was Jesus doing by going to the Cross? Broadly speaking he was doing two things. First, he was dealing with human guilt by offering himself as the perfect sacrifice as an expiation for all the sins of the world. And second, he was going into battle against his enemy and ours, the prince of this world, breaking the slavery that held us captive and destroying the devil’s power over us.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 614

“The sacrifice of Christ is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices. First, it is a gift from God the Father himself, for the Father handed his Son over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself. At the same time it is the offering of the Son of God made man, who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in preparation for our disobedience.”

That is why we Christians do not view the Cross as a tragedy, but as a great victory. Jesus embraces his suffering on the cross as an act of loving obedience to the will of the Father - reversing the disobedience of humanity reaching back to Adam. The wood of the Cross, meant as an instrument of dishonor, torture, and death, has become for us the tree of life. We are deeply sobered by what it took for God to deal with our sins, but at the same time we are grateful for what it means to us. We are not ashamed of the Cross; we recognize it as the path to all good things.

The Cross of Christ is the interpretive key that explains everything that happens in the world, from the greatest movements of human history down to the personal hopes and struggles of each of our lives. If we see the world and our lives through the lens of the Cross, we see truly. If the Cross is left out of the story, nothing can ultimately make sense.

“The Catholic Church glories in every deed of Christ. Her supreme glory, however, is the cross. Well aware of this, Paul says: ‘God forbid that I glory in anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!’ For us all, the cross is the crown of victory! It has brought light to those blinded by ignorance. It has released those enslaved by sin. Indeed, it has redeemed the whole of mankind! Do not, then, be ashamed of the cross of Christ; rather, glory in it. Although it is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, the message of the cross is our salvation.”

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

There is a further and very personal implication for us in all this. When Jesus walked the road to his crucifixion, he was doing more than accomplishing great things on our behalf; he was also showing us the pattern for our own lives. We are his disciples and we have been given his Spirit. This means that the crucifixion is at the center of our lives just as it was for Christ. To tell the story of Jesus’s life and omit the crucifixion would be to leave out the most important part that gave meaning to all the rest. To tell the story of the life of a disciple of Jesus – my life - and leave out the way Christ is being crucified in it, would be to miss the whole point. You cannot say it any more strongly than Jesus himself did: “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:38).

*“We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you,
because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world”*

St. Francis of Assisi

I. Opening Prayer

Pray together as a group:

*O Lord Jesus Christ, open the eyes of my heart that I may hear your Word,
and understand and do your will.*

*Do not hide your commandments from me, but open my eyes,
that I may perceive the wonders of your Law.*

Speak to me the hidden and secret things of your wisdom.

*On you I set my hope, O my God,
that you shall enlighten my mind and understanding with the light of your knowledge;
not only to cherish those things which are written, but to do them;
For you are the enlightenment of those who lie in darkness,
and from you comes every good deed and every gift.*

Amen.

II. Reading Scripture

Read aloud as a group the following passages.

After reading each passage, answer the questions together in order to draw out some of the key ideas.

Some main ideas for each passage are listed in the back of this book to help with your discussion if needed.

1. John 3:16-17

(God so loved the world)



- This passage is often quoted as a summary of who Jesus is and what he came to do. How would you summarize its content in your own words?
- How does this passage relate to the “big picture” of Scripture that we have been studying?



2. John 15:12-17 (“I have called you friends”)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What is the difference between a servant and a friend, according to Jesus? What might that mean in practical terms for us who are following him.
- What commandment does Jesus give us here? How does he expect us to fulfill it?

3. Matthew 16: 21-23 (Prediction of the Passion)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- Why is it difficult for Jesus’ disciples to accept and understand what Jesus is predicting?
- Why does Jesus call Peter “Satan”?

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 609

“By embracing in his human heart the Father’s love for men, Jesus ‘loved them to the end,’ for ‘greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’ (Jn 13:1; 15:13). In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men. Indeed, out of love for his Father and for men, whom the Father wants to save, Jesus freely accepted his Passion and death: ‘No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord’ (Jn 10:18). Hence, the sovereign freedom of God’s Son as he went out to his death.”

4. Matthew 26:26-29 (Institution of the Eucharist)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- This passage recounts the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus. In what context does Jesus say this, and what importance does that have for its meaning?
- What is the connection between this and the way we saw God acting throughout the Old Testament? (See Session 5)

5. Matthew 26: 36-44 (Garden of Gethsemane)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- Why is Jesus sorrowful? What might he be experiencing?
- What is Jesus' response in prayer to God the Father?

6. Luke 23:33-46 (Crucifixion)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What words does Jesus speak during his crucifixion?
- How did Jesus's human enemies triumph over him? What did they say to him?
- What does it mean that the veil of the temple was torn in two?

III. Applying Scripture

Based on your reading, discuss the following questions as they apply to your life. Depending on how much time you have available, you may not be able to discuss all of these questions. If necessary, choose one question to discuss in a significant way.

- 1 As discussed in the last session, Jesus gives us a different ideal of masculinity in comparison with what the world offers. In his death on the cross, Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of the Beatitudes that he preached during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and the exemplification of what he describes as the greatest love, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15). **In what ways are you asked to die to yourself in your everyday life? How might you better love your wife, your children, or your friends if the standard of love is to "lay down your life" (John 15)?**

- 2 We are living in an age of constant comfort that recoils from suffering of any kind and that tries to avoid it. As men, we often try to control our lives, either with money or power, so that we do not have to face uncomfortable situations, let alone real suffering. **Why do we try to ignore suffering in the world? How has our world made comfort the highest good? Have you faced situations of real suffering in your life? Have you experienced God's presence in your suffering? How does the crucifixion make our suffering more bearable?**

3 Jesus offers us a model of how to be an obedient son to our heavenly Father. Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done" is a reversal of the disobedience of Adam in the Garden of Eden. **What can this teach us about being men who accept God as our Father? What are the practical implications of accepting God's will instead of forcing your own will? What are some moments in your life when it was difficult to choose God's will instead of your own?**

4 On the cross, Jesus had in his mind every single person who he was dying for, including each of us. Men often struggle with the question of "am I enough?" or "am I worthy?", but Jesus definitively answers those questions by dying on the cross for each of us. **Have you ever considered the fact that Jesus had you and your life in mind when he was nailed to the cross? If that is the case, what kind of relationship do you think he desires with you? How can you respond to the gift of redemption that Jesus offers through his death on the cross?**

IV. Call to Action

Write down for yourself one concrete way that you are going to apply today's Scripture Study to your life.

Example:

Find for yourself a small crucifix that you are able to carry with you throughout the day. Make a point to frequently hold it as a reminder of Jesus' presence in your life, especially during times of difficulty or suffering. Say a simple prayer each time you hold it such as "Jesus, I trust in you" or "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

V. Closing Prayer

Pray together:

*Lord God, let us keep your Scriptures in mind
and meditate on them day and night,
persevering in prayer, always on watch.
We beg you, Lord, to give us real knowledge of what we read,
and to show us not only how to understand it,
but how to put it into practice,
and to obtain spiritual gifts
enlightened by the teaching of the Holy Spirit,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
whose power and glory will endure throughout all ages.
Amen.*

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

A supplemental note for further study

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he states: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:22-4). The crucifix has become such a familiar religious symbol for us that we can become immune to its shocking significance. It is a startling fact that the founder of the world's most widespread religion was executed as a criminal. Crucifixion was used by the Romans when they wanted to maximize the shame and degradation of the prisoner. It was reserved for cases of treason and rebellion; criminals and slaves were crucified, not Roman citizens. When Paul not only acknowledged the crucifixion as a fact, but preached it as the source of our life, he offended both Jews and Greeks.

For the Jews, the cross was a "stumbling block" because they were waiting for the promised Messiah, and according to their ideas, the Messiah would be vindicated by his success in establishing a new Jewish monarchy. They were looking for signs of his power and authority. The crucifixion seemed to put all that to shame. How could the Messiah be killed as a criminal? The Jewish authorities derided Jesus on the cross for just this reason: "The chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him'" (Matt 27:41-2). They could not believe that such a seemingly powerless figure could be the king they were awaiting. For the Greeks, the cross was folly because it made no sense according to their philosophies of happiness. How could a life that ended in such pain and infamy possibly be called good? What could it mean that the crucifixion was the pattern for the well-lived life?

The Cross offends all that is proud and merely this-worldly in us. It makes no sense according to the categories of the natural man. It demands humility and faith. That is why the scandal of the Cross is just the medicine we need to cure us of our pride. Paul points to this truth when he says: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:27-9). The Cross is the very low road that led Christ, and is leading us, to a very high place.

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

A supplemental note for further study

Human suffering is a great mystery and a great evil. The religions and philosophies of the world have been developed as ways of understanding and if possible escaping from various forms of suffering. Christians have learned from God that our suffering is somehow tied to our state of rebellion against him. In trying to be independent of our Creator we have made ourselves vulnerable to all kinds of pain, disorder, and darkness. Christ came among us to end the reign of darkness and to bring life and healing to a stricken humanity. That is wonderfully good news. If Jesus had immediately established the kingdom in its fullness, if Christian baptism provided an immediate relief from all suffering, there would be no problem to solve. But that is not what happens. Everyone, including Christians, continue to suffer despite Christ's coming. Why? How do we make sense of that in Christ?

At the heart of any Christian understanding of suffering is the suffering of Christ. God in Christ has taken upon himself all human suffering, and out of that evil thing he has brought forth great goodness. He allows suffering for many reasons: for purification, for growth in wisdom, for establishing justice, and, most mysteriously, as a way of participating in Christ's sufferings as he redeems the world. The result is that while suffering does not go away, it becomes transformed. That is why St. James can say: *"Count it all joy, brethren, when you meet various trials"* (James 1:2). And St. Paul can say: *"This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison"* (2 Cor 4:17).

We live in an age that has forgotten God and his wisdom, and is therefore puzzled, discouraged, and offended by suffering. For some this results in quiet desperation and a constant seeking of some kind of escape from the hard edges of reality, whether in pleasure, in addictions, or sometimes in outright suicide. For others it sparks an angry resolve to use all our powers and technical knowledge to rid the world of suffering. Both of these attitudes are delusory. Christians are the ultimate realists. Knowing the cause of suffering, and understanding that God is in the process of completely overcoming it, Christians can stare suffering in the face without either anger or discouragement, imitating Christ on his road to Calvary, *"who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Heb 12:2).

Additional Readings from Scripture

These optional readings build on the themes discussed in this session. You are encouraged to read and pray with them on your own in between this meeting and the next.

John 12: 31-3 *“Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”* He said this to show by what death he was to die.” Jesus alludes to the episode recorded in the Old Testament when the Israelites, having rebelled against God, were attacked by snakes. Moses then put a snake on a pole and held it up, and all who looked at the pole were healed. The source of death, the snake, became a road to healing. In the same way, as St. Paul says (2 Corinthians 5: 21): *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

Colossians 1:19-20 *“In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”* St. Paul speaks of the cosmic centrality of the cross, as it reconciles all creation to God.

Hebrews 7: 26-7 *“For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself.”* The Letter to the Hebrews as a whole speaks of the crucifixion of Jesus as the fulfillment of all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, and of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood. The Church often speaks of Jesus as being both sacrificial victim and priest.

1 Corinthians 1: 18 *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* Paul never tires of pointing to the crucifixion of Jesus, and in showing that only a mind renewed by the Spirit can understand it for what it is.

Romans 6: 6 *“We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”* In this passage St. Paul points to the way the crucifixion of Jesus takes effect and is present in the life of every believer as the instrument of our purification.

1 Corinthians 11: 23 *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”* Paul is referring to the celebration of the Eucharist. Each Mass is a re-living and remembering of the sacrificial offering of Christ on the cross.