

101809 HE DID IT ALL FOR YOU!

(Is it really possible for us to grasp just what Jesus of Nazareth did for us?)

On Friday we celebrated the feast of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, the seventeenth century nun to whom Our Lord appeared and revealed himself to her as the Sacred Heart. Christ asked her to spend her life spreading devotion to him under the title of the Sacred Heart. There is a story told about Sr. Margaret relating this request to her confessor, a Wise Jesuit named Claude de la Colombiere. De la Colombiere was a seasoned confessor and knew that such claims of personal revelations needed to be tested. He said to Sr. Margaret that when she next encountered Our Lord she was to ask him what Father de la Colombiere's worst sin was when he was a young man. Sister Margaret said that she would do so. When next she met Father de la Colombiere in the sacrament he asked her if she had heard from the Lord and whether she had asked his question. She said that she had. "And what did our dear Lord say about my sin?" de la Colombiere asked? "He told me to tell you that 'He forgets.'" Now, imagine that! A God who forgets our sins. How great is that?

But God must choose not to remember our sins. God freely chooses to be merciful even when our sins are offensive to him and destructive of our relationships with others and detrimental to ourselves. And yet, there is a troubling passage in the first reading that seems to present a very different side to this merciful God. The sentence in question is this: "It pleased God to crush him with infirmity." It pleased God? To crush anyone? Who is this person? Sometimes we hear sentences like that and we tend to gloss over them but they need to be paid attention to and understood correctly.

In order to understand this I am going to read some more of the particular passage from the prophet Isaiah. The selection is from the 53rd chapter and it is the last of four songs known as the Suffering servant songs of Isaiah. Listen to the passage:

He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows, (Does any of this sound familiar to you? Say, from Handel's Messiah?) Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made him whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted; yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgressions of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

(And now, here is the sentence that was translated as “God was pleased to crush him with infirmity.”) *Yet it was the will of the lord to bruise him, he has put him to grief when he makes himself an offering for sin.*”

This passage was written in the sixth century before Christ when the people of Israel had been carried off into captivity for a second time, this time to Babylon (now known as Baghdad). The lines were penned in the name of the people in exile and refer to the prophet Isaiah as they see the indignities to which he is subjected because of them either what they did not do or should have done. The followers of Jesus though, after his passion, death and resurrection, when they read this passage now saw it in a whole new light. They saw it truly as a prophetic passage pointing to the time of the Messiah and they saw it fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. They came to understand that what Jesus underwent was part of what he was sent to accomplish and what he was being asked to do by his Father. Jesus chose to undergo because he loved his father so and because that is what his Father asked of him. God is no vindictive God. God is a gracious God, a God of mercy. God’s throne is a throne of grace. God looked at us human beings acting out and lashing out and mistrusting one another and using one another. God saw us not being faithful and not being true, not being honest and acting with hardness of heart. God knew that we had lost our way, we had broken down and that we were beyond the point of being able to “fix” ourselves.

And so, God deigns that all that is our fault, all the sin done by us and all the sin done to us by others, God placed upon the shoulders of his only Beloved Son. We could not handle it. Not then; not now. We cannot fix ourselves. It can only be done by the Creator God. Only God can transform, create anew, and transfigure. And so, God’s Beloved takes on human flesh. We call this person Jesus, true God and true man. And Jesus’ task is to show us the Father’s love—its length and breadth and height and depth; to show us what a loving heart looks like in action; to fill us with the very Spirit of God so that we would have the power. He lived this way because the father asked him. He lived this way because that is who He is. His baptism in the Jordan River was to establish that he truly identified with us as sinners who need to be contrite and have our sins washed away. He brought the Holy Spirit to that moment and to all subsequent baptisms in his name. But the real baptism of Jesus comes at the end of his life in Gethsemane, on the way to Calvary and on the Mount of Golgotha where he dies. That is the cup he refers to when asked by James and John. That is the baptism He was to receive, the bitter baptism of suffering, the baptism referred to in Isaiah chapter 53.

But all of that is transformed on Easter Sunday when He bursts forth from the tomb alive and nevermore to die. You and I have been baptized into Christ which means we are baptized into his loving heart and into his victory over sin, over suffering and over death itself. What He now asks of us is what his Father asked of Him: to live in the world with a loving heart. We receive no guarantee that our doing so will mean that we only encounter loving hearts in return, for He did not. That is not why we do this. We do this because that is what He asks of us. We do this because that is who we now are.