

Easter Sunday *The Lamb redeems the Sheep*

April 20, 2014 Cathedral of Saint Paul

Readings: Acts of the Apostles 10:34, 37-43; Colossians 3: 1-4; John 20: 1-9

Six years ago I was privileged to make a pilgrimage retreat to the Holy Land with a group of 25 priests, and towards the end of it, we made a very brief stop at the Western Wall, considered the holiest of Jewish sites. It is sacred because it is a remnant of the Herodian retaining wall that once enclosed and supported the Second Temple. Built in 20 B.C., it is also known as the “**Wailing Wall**” because for centuries Jews have gathered to pray here to lament the loss of their temple in 70 A.D.

As we made our way to the site to pray, someone— having noticed our group—called out to us, “God is one; He is not a man.” He insisted the Archbishop who was leading the retreat remove his Cross, which he did not. While I am sure he was sincere, the idea that God became man was all-together too much for him; it did not square with his reading of the Scriptures or his understanding of the One God.

It is into this very place, in the midst competing beliefs that we wait in utter silence, hoping against hope that our Savior did not die in vain, believing with all our hearts that the ignominious death suffered by our Lord in his sacred humanity truly served to reveal his glorious divinity with the discovery of the empty tomb, and that his death and resurrection will bring new life to a fallen world.

To the man at the Western Wall, our very presence elicited only consternation. Twenty-six priests vested in cassocks represented foolishness at least, utter heresy and blasphemy at worst. The Easter Sequence *Victimae Paschali laudes*¹ beautifully captures the themes of paradox and reversal: *Agnus redemit oves* – the Lamb redeems the sheep.

¹ Usually attributed to Wipo of Burgundy, an 11th century monk and chaplain to the Holy Roman Emperor, Conrad II.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the Good Shepherd. But precisely because Jesus offers his life for the sheep, he becomes the lamb of expiation. St. Gregory of Nazianzen noted this paradox in his writings: He is sold, and very cheap, for it is only for thirty pieces of silver; but he redeems the world, and that at a great price, for the price was his own blood. As a sheep he is led to the slaughter, but he is the shepherd of Israel, and now of the whole world also. As a lamb he is silent, yet he is the Word, and is proclaimed by the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He is bruised and wounded, but he heals every disease and every infirmity.²

In silence, Jesus absorbed the pain and the hatred that was visited upon him. The key Good Friday moment came in the realization that this pain and violence would not be passed on - it was to be absorbed. From one perspective this resurrection day is truly beyond words, surpassing the limits of our minds to comprehend. Yet, we remain unapologetic in our conviction that we need a Savior, who by means of his salvific death, has made eternal life possible for us. We have proclaimed unequivocally this day that death simply cannot be the end of everything.

The Lamb redeems the sheep. Jesus' resurrection is a transition into God's eternity and a fulfillment of all that remained hopelessly unfulfilled on earth. This hope must be our fundamental reason for living- may our joy extinguish and transform the despair in our world with the light of Christ's glory. The grave, a symbol of defeat, has been transformed into an instrument for our salvation. We cannot remain sitting here.

We must return to the Galilee of our time, our families, our cities, our nation and lovingly yet courageously proclaim that the emptiness of the tomb has brought about the fullness of life in us. He has been raised; he is not here. Let us go forth to proclaim the Good News.

² Gregory of Nazianzen, Oration XXIX, The Third Theological Oration: On the Son, para.XX