

A GOOD DEATH
Homily for Good Friday
LPC, 4/10/09

None of us wants to die, but we know all of us eventually will. This being the unavoidable truth, we all at least want a good death. We want to die well. I mean if we have to go, we all want to go with dignity and courage, not cringing in fear or screaming for mercy. We want to go in a way worthy of the persons of faith we know ourselves to be.

Let's look at the deaths of some persons of faith in fact and fiction to inspire us.

Francis Poulenc wrote an opera called *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, set during the French revolution. Early in this opera, the very holy Mother Superior of the convent dies in great pain, crying out that God has forsaken her. The other nuns are deeply disturbed that their mentor, known for her great faith, seems to have doubted that faith in her final agonies.

Wait – that's not a good example. Let me try again.

I was once friends with a woman who was a sort of disciple to Emily Gardiner Neal. Emily Gardiner Neal was a reporter who started to investigate miraculous healings, intending to present these healings from a critical, dispassionate, scientific standpoint. She started out a skeptic and found her faith deeply moved. She wrote and taught extensively about her findings, and ended up inspiring many people and churches to pursue healing ministries. My friend knew her through the end of her life. She remembers visiting Miss Neal in the hospital but having to cut her visit short because Emily was in such pain. As my friend went down the hall she heard Emily shouting from her bed, "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

OK, stop. Maybe that's not so inspirational either. Let me turn to someone I knew personally.

If you were here last night you heard me talk about my mentor Ellin Deese, who took considerable trouble, even as she was dying, to guide me toward becoming a priest myself. Ellin was a wonderful, loving, wise woman, and she loved God with a strong, strong faith. She faced her cancer with a smiling face, sure of God's abiding care through anything life could throw at her. When she'd been in hospice care for six months and the insurance gave out and her husband picked up MRSA and was not allowed to see her, even on their 50th anniversary, Ellin became fretful. "It's taking too long to die," she complained with considerable bitterness, "How can God be so cruel to me? This is no good. This is no good at all."

Oh all right. Obviously everyday human examples are not going to serve here. We have to look to Jesus to inspire us.

Jesus, hanging on the cross in inconceivable agony, has the grace to forgive his betrayers, to comfort one of the criminals hanging on the cross beside him, and to give his mother into the care of the disciple John. Sometime later, he quotes a psalm on the cross, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Whoops. Looks like even Jesus succumbs to some really soul-shaking, negative feelings toward the end. If this is so, what hope do we ordinary mortals have of maintaining a cheerful faith through all things?

The bad news is, we have no such hope. Jesus does not promise in word, or demonstrate in deed, that we will be spared any pain at all.

But there’s good news in this Good Friday, too. Do you think Poulenc’s Mother Superior, or Emily Gardiner Neal, or Ellin Deese, would have had any use for a message that said, “Don’t worry. Don’t be sad. Everything is good. Just change your attitude and you’ll see”?

Monty Python’s movie satire of the Christ story, *Life of Brian*, ends with a whole hillside of crucified men singing cheerfully, “Always look on the bright side of life.” This scene may be crude, but it really shows how ridiculous faith is when it just tells you to cheer up.

Here’s the good news. When Emily or Ellin or you or I are the cross, Jesus can say, “Oh, my dear. Oh, my dear. I know. O God, I know. I’m so, so sorry. I can’t make it stop, but I can hang here with you, my poor suffering child. I’m here.” Don’t you think that means more, so much more, than sentimental platitudes to the suffering?

Jesus’ tears and blood and sweat fall with our own, commingling in this cup we’re about to drink. The least we can do in return is to say, “Jesus, we’re so, so sorry. We’re here.” And if we can extend that compassion, as Jesus did, to others who are suffering right now, we will be truly faithful. It is love, rather than dignity and courage, that marks a really good death. And a good life.