

4.10.20 (Good Friday)

When John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, his wife Jacqueline was with him in the car which was making its way through Dallas' city streets in welcome of the president. Photos of the actual moment of the shooting show her trying to climb out of the car's back-seat onto its trunk. What was she trying to do? Perhaps shield her husband from the direction from which she instinctively felt the bullet had come. Then there are the later pictures of her at the hospital and on the plane where she was present as Vice-President Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office as the new president. In all these photos it is clear that she had not changed her clothes which were marked with blood, her husband's blood. There had been no time for that in all the confusion of that horrible event. But if there had been, she might have refused to change clothes. She might have said to herself, perhaps only half-consciously, that she wanted the nation to see what had happened to its president, her husband. Not to blame the nation itself, but somehow to make it clear to it what had happened: that someone, perhaps a deranged person, had taken his life and that the blood on her clothes symbolized the cost of his service to the nation.

Blood was also much present on this day in the Lord's life, this day we call "Good" Friday. There must have been blood on the Lord's body before he reached the place of crucifixion because he had been scourged and a crown of thorns had been driven into his head. Then came the crucifixion. Nails into flesh must have produced blood. And then, according to John's Gospel, after his death the piercing of his side produced a flow of blood and water.

Some of us are squeamish even at the sight of blood. Therefore, we find it hard to fathom the accounts of sacrifice in ancient religions in which it was presumed that the shedding of human blood appeased the gods. Indeed we find it hard to read of Moses' anointing of the altars and the people with the blood of animals. We find such actions hard to understand and even repulsive.

However, we can understand that the greatest sacrifice one person can offer another is the willingness to give his or her life in order to protect the other person. Such giving often expresses itself in years of unselfish service to the other person. But in other cases this giving requires the physical and immediate laying down of one's life in a violent way. And then blood flows. Soldiers do this, Parents do this to save their children. Jesus did that in fidelity to what he saw as his vocation from his Father.

John's Gospel tells us that after Jesus' death "one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out (Jn 19:14). St. John Chrysostom (347-407 AD), who was the patriarch of Constantinople and knew exile and suffering in his own life, reminds us that the destroying angels in God's last plague against the Egyptians passed over the homes of the Jews when they saw the blood of the lambs sprinkled on their doors, and that this action symbolized in advance the blood of the Lord poured out to save us. That fact is made present to us, he tells us, in the sacrament of the altar. There Jesus' blood is again present, saving and purifying us. The church itself is born from the side of the crucified Christ because the water and blood which flowed from it symbolize the sacraments by which the church is born and preserved, the water of baptism and the blood of the eucharist.

No doubt John Chrysostom is right in telling us that John's Gospel points us to a symbolic understanding of the water and blood flowing from the Lord's side. We can accept the fact that the two sacraments of baptism and eucharist are symbolized in this act. And that may be all we need to know and accept. It is enough to know and accept that the Lord had to pour out his life, and so his blood, in order to give us life. We understand that even if we are

not comfortable in the sight of blood. And given our sensibilities we might turn to another symbol of the Lord's ultimate and complete sacrifice of himself for us, that of the image of the wood of his cross and the nails used to fix him to it. We call them both sweet: "Sweet the wood, sweet the nails." Yet this image may not help much either. In the end we may have to recognize the fact that in the ultimate giving of life there is going to be blood.