

**HOMILY**  
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**GOOD FRIDAY**  
**BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHEDRAL**  
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My Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

We have just heard the moving story of Christ's Passion as recounted by St. John. I am sure that for many of us, it took on special meaning and significance in light of Mel Gibson's artistic presentation. Quite apart from any judgments on the artistic or theological qualities of his representation, much of the media attention has focused on the intriguing and challenging question: who is responsible for the death of Jesus?

Actually, this is a very appropriate question for our consideration on Good Friday. On one level, we might put the responsibility at the hands of the Jewish leadership of the time of Jesus, notably, the chief priests and the Scribes. And yet, we know that their power and influence was very limited, for they were themselves completely under Roman governance. As they themselves say to Pilate in today's Gospel, "*We do not have the right to execute anyone.*"

So then, should the blame fall to Pilate, the highest-ranking Roman authority? Ultimately, even though he vacillated, it was his word that sent Jesus to

death. No matter how passive he may have been, he did have the title and authority.

And then of course, there is Judas, the one who betrayed Him and handed Him over to the Jewish leadership in the garden. But as we consider the fate of poor Judas, we wonder about how free he really was and whether he understood all the implications of his action. How much culpability should fall on his shoulders?

From a certain theological perspective, one could even say that God the Father had a certain responsibility for all of this, inasmuch as He allowed His Son to be handed over to rejection, suffering and death. Although Jesus clearly was put to death by human beings who rejected Him, nonetheless, the Father did not intervene to stop the whole process and save His Son from humiliation, torture, suffering and death. Inasmuch as God the Father allowed human “justice” to run its course, it seems that He is part of the picture.

Over the centuries, theologians have struggled with this same dilemma. Why did Jesus have to die? Did God the Father *demand* or *expect* such a sacrifice in order to compensate for the sin of Adam and Eve? Such a theory of atonement seems to make Jesus the Father’s victim and makes the Father someone who needs to be reconciled with us.

Perhaps a better way to look at the whole thing is to say that Jesus is not the victim of the *Father*, but rather, He is *our* victim. It is not the *Father* who had to

be reconciled, but *we ourselves*, for our sins have left us isolated and alienated, cut off from God and others. By suffering like us and for us, Jesus showed us the way out of our self-centered pride and fear. Jesus “paid the price”—as St. Paul puts it—not of God’s anger, but of our own self-centeredness.

The mystery of Christ's suffering is not about trying to appease or win back the good grace of God the Father. As we see in the story of the Prodigal Son, it is truly the Father who is “prodigal” or extravagant in mercy and compassion, ready and waiting for the homecoming of any and all who sin. Jesus died not because the Father required it but because He chose to absorb our human anger, and thereby, transform it. He understood that the only way to break through our defenses and heal us would be precisely by allowing us to inflict on Him our pain and anger.

In the mystery of the cross, God transforms our self-hatred and brings us healing *from within*. God embraces and accepts us at our very worst—not in spite of our sin but precisely because of it.

In this understanding of things, therefore, Pontius Pilate is not the villain of the story; rather, he represents all humanity and all the Pilates of this world who harshly judge innocent people and set wicked people free. Rather than point fingers at Judas or the Jewish authorities, perhaps we need to look in the mirror and consider our own culpability for the death of Jesus and the ways we have betrayed

or denied Him by failing to fully commit our lives to the Lord, by our refusal to accept the embrace of His love.

Consider the contrast of the figures in today's Passion account. On one side, you could line up Pilate, Judas, and Caiaphas, and on the other, the Mother of the Lord, the beloved disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus. The first group was all about power and control, whereas the second group humbly accepted the flow of events and refused to get caught in a power struggle. They understood that the story unfolding right in the midst of them was the choice between power in an earthly sense, or love. And they chose the path of love. They chose the way of vulnerability, poverty and dependence.

As Cardinal Ratzinger once said, the sin of Adam in the garden, the sin that took humanity down the wrong path, flowed from his false image of God. Adam thought God was all about power and control and so he reached for the tree of knowledge. In point-of-fact, the God revealed to us today on the tree of life is a God who set aside all power for the sake of love.

Who suffered more—the Father or the Son? Did they not *both* suffer equally and intensely? Certainly, the beloved disciple and Mother of the Lord also suffered, for they knew the pain of complete identification with Jesus in His humiliation, rejection, and physical torture.

Who was responsible for the death of the Lord? In the end, anyone and everyone who chooses the way of power and control over the path of love. Perhaps the anonymous author of today's first reading best summarizes the mystery of why Christ suffered and died for us all. Even though he wrote several centuries before Christ, he accurately articulated the question and the response, the mystery and the challenge of what we contemplate this day. And so, the prophet describes the Suffering Servant: *“Because of him, kings shall stand speechless... He was spurned and avoided by people, a man of suffering, accustomed to affliction, one of those from whom people hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem... Oppressed and condemned, He was taken away and who would have thought any more of His destiny?... But the Lord was pleased to crush Him in infirmity. If He gives His life as an offering for sin, He shall see His descendents in a long life and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through Him...”*

May we follow the path of Christ the New Adam by admitting our responsibility for His death and asking His mercy. As we kiss the cross, may we resolve to set aside our habits of judging others and blaming others. Instead, let us resolve to follow the example of St. Francis of Assisi who went to the extreme of trying to climb up the Lord's cross to share in His pain and rejection. United to the Lord, may we work with Him for our own salvation and that of all people; may we

answer the question about responsibility and culpability for Jesus' death by the silent humble gesture of walking with Jesus on the way of the cross, the path of love, the journey from the desert of isolation to the garden of solidarity and new life. Amen.