

Nothing Special Friday

If you've been outside at all today, running errands, at work, just hanging out in the garden, you know that for most of world this is just another typical day, nothing special. People are going to the bank, to exercise class, shopping for groceries, coming home. They're getting coffee, standing in line for a bagel, shopping for food to make dinner. They're typing away, writing emails, developing code, designing buildings. Still others are giving or receiving medical tests, taking chemotherapy or radiation, or-hours of dialysis. For most of the world around us, there's nothing special about today.

But we are here this night because it's not quite enough to wave palms and bask in Easter joy. We want to stand with Jesus' friends and family at the cross, watching, waiting, wailing. We, too, want to see where they put him, where his body ends up. There's something special about him to us... but not to most of the people around us. All around us life goes on just as it always does, nothing special about this Friday.

The gospel writers spent a lot of time writing about the events we remember this Holy Week. They spend as much time on Jesus' last few days as they did on everything else put together. Out of Mark's sixteen chapters about six center on the last week of Jesus' life. Similar stats are there for the other three Gospels. The memories of those days must have stayed with Jesus' friends in sharp, painful detail.

Today we remember the anguish Jesus felt on the cross. Back then, crucifixion was a common form of death. The words "cross" and "crucify" come from the generic Latin word for torture. This kind of death was so common that the vertical poles stayed in place always, usually at the top of a hill or by a well-traveled road or at city gate. The more people who saw those posts, the better. They were a sign of the power possessed by the Roman Empire. Perhaps those crosses acted as a deterrent, preventing any thoughts of rebellion against such imperial power. The prisoners commonly carried their own horizontal cross pieces, laboring under the weight of the wood so that their fear could grow. It was a common practice to whip them in order to weaken the condemned as much as possible, hastening their death.

For Jesus, there was one special incentive. The people doing the crucifixion were in a hurry. It was at the time of Passover. Jesus had to be dead and buried before the start of day at sundown in order to comply with the religious law.

Some of the condemned were nailed in place. Others were simply tied in place. A sign was posted overhead for Jesus. This was also a common practice. That way everyone could see what the criminal had done to deserve this fate. "The King of the Jews" was a title that the Romans used for Herod in a mocking way. That title makes fun of Herod, a ruler of a small province located far from the important business of the Roman hierarchy. They used it again to make fun of Jesus. Nothing special in that title.

Nothing special about the way the soldiers mocked Jesus. It was all part of the formula. Victims of crucifixion were mocked before and during the process. It was common to dress up the prisoner in order to make fun of him. A purple cloak symbolizing royalty was just one more way of mockery and debasement. The purple cloak mocked the claim of royalty; the crown of thorns and laurel wreath of Caesar added to the derision. A reed was substituted for a rulers' scepter, another common mockery for political prisoners. Even the dividing of the condemned's clothing was common place. The soldiers gambled to obtain an extra bonus for doing this work.

For most people on those streets of Jerusalem this was just another day, just another crucifixion. The whole town came out to see it.

But for us this day is special. Each of us has something in our life that's causing pain: illness, grief, family problems, money problems, work problem, shame, guilt, stress. Each of us has some pain eating away at us. There are times when God seems so far away while we endure the

suffering all around us. There's nothing special about that, except our savior chose to enter into that suffering with us in order to fill it with the very presence God. Christ chose to bring that presence of God to us wherever hurt exists. To every place of hurt, to every place of pain, to every unbearable sorrow. Christ is right there with us. He chose this suffering to make certain that we know that God is never absent from the world even when it doesn't make much sense to us. That's why today is special for us. Life goes on. For many there's nothing special about this day. They need to hear of the hope that has come to us in Christ. We carry with us the cry of the Roman soldier, "Truly this was the Son of God" in our suffering. We carry that proclamation throughout our lives, knowing that "It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming!"