

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon by Father Bradford preached at Stations of the Cross
On Friday in the Second Week of Lent
March 6, 2015

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Killing Jesus is an old story. We know how it ends. To those who already have faith, the revelation of God is seen in these events. That revelation demands and bears repeated telling of the story and meditation upon it. To those who do *not* have faith, the Killing of Jesus is more than just a pivotal event in world history. Even non-believers recognize the Passion of Christ as a “representative death” containing some of the permanent elements in human life: betrayal, innocence overwhelmed by evil, cowardice, courage, and loss.

One way to ponder these elements is through the devotion known as Stations of the Cross. The fourteen incidents from **Christ Standing before Pilate** to **His Body being laid in the Tomb** have inspired countless souls, great saints and simple folk, and a whole gamut of poets, artists, sculptors, and musicians. That is a matter of historical record. But it is also true today. The story of Killing Jesus has a powerful hold on devotional and artistic imagination in our own day.

Christian believers understand the reason for this powerful attraction to Jesus of Nazareth on the *Via dolorosa*. It is because this man is not a dead Christ but a Living Lord. We do not worship and adore a dead hero who lived thirty-three years 2000 years ago and too bad if you missed Him! Consider that we have three ways to experience time. There is *time past*. We look back when we can no longer experience except through memory and imagination. That may be the initial approach of the outsider or the occasional participant in Stations of the Cross. Then we can experience *time present*. But time present is moving, and always slipping into the past.

Then there is the third way. Jesus and His story is a *permanent presence*. Stations of the Cross uses historical events and a material form for the very reason that the Word made flesh was both crucified and is gloriously resurrected. Stations of the Cross is a *time engine*. The historical events and material form have something contemporary about them. And the pictures of the Stations on the walls of the church, with the meditations offered, can be springboards into Divine truth.

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Consider the Greek word **sumballo**, which is the origin of our English word *symbol*. It means bringing together things which are normally apart. Let's say three of us equally owned a sugar-refining business and decided it would only be by unanimous vote that decisions to buy or sell would obligate our company. Our company would have a corporate seal to affix to contracts. And as a guarantee to the three owners, each of us would have in his possession one-third of that seal, and we would bring them together and fix the whole seal in wax on the unanimously-agreed-upon contract. That act would be **sumballo**: bringing together things which are normally kept apart. And the Church seized upon that word to describe what happens when the holy things of God meet up with the ordinary events in our life. In that way we understand the sacraments of the Church as symbols. But you can also see how watered down the English word *symbol* has become, when an object stands in for something that is absent or invokes the memory of something otherwise nebulous.

You and I may not be having a revelatory moment this week in Lent, or at all during Lent this year, last year, or next. But that is all right! We know God breaks through. And we use words like *manifestation* and *epiphany* to describe this Divine character trait. The priest gets to greet people on their way out the door after Stations of the Cross. Most of the time the experience has been a very appropriate way to spend a Lenten Friday evening. "Thank you and see you next week!" But once in a while a particular Station either in its material portrayal on the church wall, or the meditation offered upon it, has triggered the break through, and the worshipper lingers for a while, maybe doesn't even want to greet the clergyman or anyone else. The artwork may be of the finest museum quality (I think of those by the Italian craftsman Angelo Lualdi in one of my parishes) or a print of a simple woodblock on stiff paper I had to tape on the wall at another parish.) The meditation may be new and startling or one that has been heard a hundred times. But the God moment has arrived. And the church has a word for the result: **Metanoia**, a change of heart, to see as God sees.

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In Stations of the Cross the revelation is never public. It is always private and personal. It happens when you have made a practice of attending the King in His Passion, when you have waited upon Him. Much of the time our belief in God is a remote and generalized concept of distant divinity. In ancient Jerusalem a poor condemned man carrying his cross passes your doorstep as you sweep the threshold and barely look up at the common sight. And then one Friday night in Lent in the Year of Our Lord 2015 God Incarnate passes you by along the *Via dolorosa*. And you know. Something that has been hidden in the familiar old story is now disclosed. Something covered or obscure is made clear. And in that moment you learn about God's way with human nature. *And His way with you.*