

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Palm Sunday  
April 9, 2017

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About the ninth hour The Son of God cried with a loud voice saying, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” You and I know these are the first words of *Psalms 22*. Sometime later everyone heard Jesus again when He exclaimed “Into Thy hands I commit My spirit.” They recognized words from the *31<sup>st</sup> Psalm*. Contemplating the Passion, many of the saints have understood that the Blessed Lord was praying the Psalms *sequentially* while He hung upon the Cross.

We are not to think of Jesus as making the time go faster by reciting the Psalms! This was not a pious Jew’s version of singing “ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall!” Thy physical ordeal of a man nailed to a cross is something none of us can ever begin to imagine. So we draw a far different conclusion. In *desperation* Blessed Jesus was drawing upon all the spiritual resources He had known since He was a child. Those spiritual resources included the Psalms.

The Passion narrative makes it clear. Our Lord’s physical body was being destroyed as if He were some kind of venomous snake being beaten repeatedly because of the fear it contained some incomprehensible energy or force. We did not need the movie *The Passion of the Christ* to tell us Our Lord Jesus was killed by an incredible combination of blows, whips, thorns, hard labor, nails, and a spear. The Bible told us all that. And yet it also becomes clear in reading the Passion accounts that the greatest suffering was caused by the isolation Our Lord Jesus felt, both in Gethsemane and on the Cross.

We can only be amazed when we hear told how human beings often survive great physical ordeals and punishment. Newspapers tell of earthquake survivors who were rescued alive after being buried in rubble for more than a week. Some years ago the British Government wanted to commemorate the anniversary of the end of World War II by staging a “forgive and forget” ceremony with Japan. A sizeable group of scarlet-coated pensioners would have nothing to do with it. These old soldiers were survivors of the Japanese prison camps in Malaya. And when they returned home in 1945 no one wanted to believe the horror of the stories they brought with them. Some things never change. Roman crucifixions were as brutal as it gets. Sometimes those crucified hung upon crosses for days before dying. The execution on the day we call *Good Friday* was not mitigated by the fact it was a

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rush job due to the proximity of the high holy days. But people can and do survive incredible physical suffering.

Betrayal is different. Betrayal can defeat men and women even at the height of their powers. Isolation, the loss of love, and loneliness, occupy the darkest corner of the human condition. They are also part of the Passion story. The betrayal by the twelve apostles pulled Blessed Jesus into that place where hope dies. And for the Divine Son in Whom the Father was well pleased, the final and most horrid betrayal in Perfect Love is the fear that God does not care.

There is no pretending on the Cross. Catholics never pretend that because Jesus is really God this agony was only for show. About the Incarnation we are told, “God emptied Himself.” And although we cannot know entirely what that means, when Jesus was hanging on the Cross He seems to have lost the life-long connection He had with His Own Divine destiny. And it was precisely by this forgetting that Our Lord became completely one with us. Because we can and do forget our destiny, and we can and do come to the place where all we can say is, “if God exists He doesn’t care.” And so our Lord’s Own forsakenness is a revealing of Almighty God’s relentless love. God Incarnate would and did experience everything we do yet did not sin. And Easter morning has something to say about that.

Ever since the Crucifixion we have prayed to God in a different way. When we offer our own petitions or our praises or thanksgivings we conclude by saying “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The only notable exception is The Lord’s Prayer. It doesn’t end that way. But the Lord’s Prayer was given us *before* Good Friday. And then on the night before Calvary Jesus said, “Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My Name. Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My Name, He will give it you.” Ever since then, every prayer we make is prayed from *the other side* of the Passion of Christ. “Through Christ our Lord.” Passing over to life through Him. That is what it means. The phrase isn’t just a stock closer or a warning to get ready to say *Amen!* Rather it is our absolute claim on the Heart of our Heavenly Father. What we plead is the sacrifice of His dear Son. “Through Christ our Lord means Jesus’ death is the way we pass over from death to life. He has made it so. And we are glad. We call the day of His death *Good Friday*.”