

As we continue in our Lenten season on the way to the Passion of our Lord, I'd like to share with you an article I came across some time ago regarding the meaning of "Good Friday." I'll let the article speak for itself with regard to that day, but I will say a few words about traditions.

The Lutheran reformers recognized the value of traditions (which I have alluded to at various times in the past) so long as those traditions serve the Gospel rather than being an end in themselves. As you read, you will probably recognize some traditions presented here which had no need of reform, but rather could be kept for use in teaching the Word and edifying believers.

"The Goodness of Good Friday" by Chris Armstrong

What a supreme paradox. We now call the day Jesus was crucified, Good.

Many believe this name simply evolved—as language does. They point to the earlier designation, "God's Friday," as its root. (This seems a reasonable conjecture, given that "goodbye" evolved from "God be with you.")

Whatever its origin, the current name of this holy day offers a fitting lesson to those of us who assume (as is easy to do) that "good" must mean "happy." We find it hard to imagine a day marked by sadness as a good day.

Of course, the church has always understood that the day commemorated on Good Friday was anything but happy. Sadness, mourning, fasting, and prayer have been its focus since the early centuries of the church. A fourth-century church manual, the Apostolic Constitutions, called Good Friday a "day of mourning, not a day of festive Joy." Ambrose, the fourth-century archbishop..., called it the "day of bitterness on which we fast."...

Yet, despite—indeed because of—its sadness, Good Friday is truly good. Its sorrow is a godly sorrow. It is like the sadness of the Corinthians who wept over the sharp letter from their dear teacher, Paul, convicted of the sin in their midst. Hearing of their distress, Paul said, "My joy was greater than ever." Why? Because such godly sorrow "brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret" (2 Cor. 7:10).

I like to think the linguistic accident that made "God's Friday" into "Good Friday" was no accident at all. It was God's own doing—a sharp, prophetic jab at a time and a culture obsessed by happiness. In the midst of consumerism's Western playground, Good Friday calls to a jarring halt the sacred "pursuit of happiness." The cross reveals this pursuit for what it is: a secondary thing.

This commemoration of Christ's death reminds us of the human sin that caused this death. And we see again that salvation comes only through godly sorrow—both God's and, in repentance, ours. To pursue happiness, we must first experience sorrow. He who goes forth sowing tears returns in joy.

At the same time, of course, Good Friday recalls for us the greatness and wonder of God's love—that He should submit to death for us.

No wonder, in parts of Europe, the day is called not "Good," but "Great" or "Holy" Friday.

Today, Christian liturgies reflect the gravity of Christ's act....

They reflect, in a series of readings and songs, on Christ's seven last words.... This form originated with seventeenth-century Peruvian Jesuits, one of many cases in which modern Protestants have picked up Catholic devotional practices.

In the Catholic Good Friday Mass, the altar is stripped of all adornments, and worshipers venerate the cross by kissing a crucifix. In the "Ceremony of the Winding Sheet," Greek Catholics carry a cloth depicting Jesus' dead body in procession to a shrine, where the priest places it in a symbolic tomb.

Some Western churches still celebrate a medieval liturgy called the Tenebrae, or Service of Darkness, in which candles and lights are gradually extinguished until the congregation sits in complete darkness—a representation of the darkness that covered the earth at the death of Jesus (Mark 15:33). Scripture readings and hymns lead the worshipers in a communal repentance for the sins that made the Crucifixion necessary....

Good Friday has always challenged merely human goodness. Its sad commemoration reminds us that in the face of sin, our goodness avails nothing. Only One is good enough to save us. That He did so is cause indeed for celebration.