

Good Friday, 2009
April 10, 2009
St. John the Evangelist Parish
Deacon James J. Benjamin

We listen to two versions of the Passion of Jesus every year, the first, from Mark, Matthew or Luke, on Palm Sunday, and then John's recounting of the story each Good Friday. This year, I found myself searching for a way to experience this event for myself, not just as words but inside, in a new way, in my heart. I invite you to imagine with me something of what Jesus did for us on his painful climb to Calvary.

Paul tells us, in Philippians, ch. 2, probably quoting an ancient Christian hymn, that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings."

It's this phrase, "emptied himself" that I want to consider. What could it mean for Jesus to "empty himself?"

His entire life was a continuing process of self-emptying, of letting go of all attachments, and of focusing on doing what his Father intended him to do.

Living a life of service, healing all who came to him, frequently tired, hungry, exhausted, had to have been part of the emptying, as he let go of his own need for comfort, in his mission to bring God's love and forgiveness to others.

Following this path led inevitably to the cross, where he continued to pour himself out.

Paul helps us understand the price that Jesus paid, telling us that Jesus humbled himself and became obedient, even unto death.

There is, it seems, a link between emptying oneself and being humble. There is also a relationship between obedience, humility and service to others. The root of "humble" is humus, earth; knowing we come from earth and will return there helps prevent us from too much pride. The more humble we are, the more we avoid feeling proud of all we've accomplished, all by ourselves, and the more we realize that we couldn't accomplish much without the help of others,

especially the help of the Other who created us.

Maybe you feel a bit uncomfortable with the idea of becoming empty;
I do.

I think the discomfort is because the thought of being empty,
being humble, being obedient, goes against the grain for us Americans,
people who think of ourselves as being in control of our own destinies,
masters and mistresses of the universe.

Jesus, in his humility and in his obedience,
surrendered control over his destiny
when he let himself be handed over to the Roman authorities
and to the Jewish leaders.

He knew well what they would do to him.

He let go of one of our deepest instincts,
to preserve our own lives at any cost.

“Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?”

The fact is that we're not in control of our lives;
sometimes I reflect that I couldn't even take my next breath
without God loving me into life.

For many, if not most of us, though,
even the thought of doing what Jesus did,
emptying ourselves of our pride,
our wanting to be in control of our lives,
our desire to depend on ourselves alone
and not needing anyone's help, would surely seem difficult, if not impossible.

How hard it is for you and me to admit that we don't know all the answers.
How very difficult it is for us to empty ourselves of the need
to control the people around us and the circumstances of our lives,
and just admit that we don't necessarily know what should happen
and what must be the right outcome.

It is almost impossible at times for you and me to do what others say,
to be obedient to someone else,
especially when we think we know best.

And yet, Jesus emptied himself of much more than that,
when he humbled himself,
putting himself voluntarily under the control of people
whom he knew would kill him.

He seems to have been resolute,
setting his face like flint, as the prophet Isaiah had foretold,
in order to remain obedient to his Father's will,
to offer himself as the servant of all.

Our small efforts to humble ourselves pale in contrast to what Jesus did,
but our experience of trying to do that
will give us just a taste of what he accomplished.
Washing each other's feet,
as we did last evening,
is hard enough to do just as an exercise.
How difficult it is for us to serve others in real life,
especially if we don't get the thanks or the recognition we think we deserve.

Continuing his lifelong process of self-emptying,
on the way to Golgotha Jesus emptied himself still more
as he also left behind his innocence.
By that I mean that he was willing to be branded,
and held up for all to see, as a criminal.
Innocent of any sin, he did take on all sins.
And that exposed him,
hanging there, on the cross,
to the shame that would be heaped on a murderer or a traitor.
He shed his self-respect and his need for privacy,
displaying before all his naked, bleeding and broken body.
Obedient to his Father and committed to serving those around him,
love poured from him until the end,
making sure his mother would be taken care of,
and trusting the beloved disciple with her future.

Lord, as we listen again to your story of love and sacrifice for us
help us to empty ourselves of our pride,
our unwillingness to love and forgive.
Make us more patient
and give us more desire to follow you
and to live as you did,
to serve as you served,
in hope that we, too, may one day be with you in paradise.