

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am sure some of you are aware of the legend of the robin. According to this tale the robin was originally a little brown bird. That is, until the first Good Friday. On that terrible day this little brown bird saw a man nailed to a cross, slowly dying. He was all by himself and there was no one to help him. The little brown bird began trying to free the man from the cross. He flew around and around until he found a way to remove a thorn from the crown of thorns that circled the man's head, and in removing a thorn the little bird stuck himself. And the diving back and forth to the nails and to the thorns on the man's head, the little brown bird got his little breast all red with blood, and since then he has been known as a robin—the little bird with a red breast.

It's just a legend, of course, but the man on the cross was real. Among the Romans crucifixion was a common form of execution of notorious criminals. According to Josephus, a 1st century historian, during the reign of King Herod at least 168 such crucifixions took place in Judea. The only person remembered and named of all those who underwent this most horrible, inhuman, and torturous form of execution is Jesus of Nazareth.

The questions that I have long pondered are why was it necessary? Was there no other way? Of course, even brilliant theologians have never come up with really satisfying answers to these questions.

However, after years of reflection and meditation, it has occurred to me that, though I don't fully understand it, God deemed it was necessary. This was God's way.

In fact, God prepared us for this day which we call Good Friday, more than 700 years before Christ was even born. In the prophecy of Isaiah we are reminded today that this was to be the work, the mission of the Messiah: "Even as many were amazed at him—so marred was his look beyond human semblance and his appearance beyond that of the sons of man...there was in in no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by people, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, one of those from whom people hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem. Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured, while we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all...If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him...he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses."

God, therefore, saw the suffering and dying of Jesus as necessary to pay the price for our sins. Nothing less would do. No one else could pay such a price but that perfect image of himself who was his very own Son. So much does God love us that He was willing to sacrifice Himself in the person of His Son to draw us back to Him. St. John puts it this way in the 4th Chapter of his First Letter: “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son in expiation for our sins”.

Now many of us have a problem with that. The poet and playwright, T.S. Eliot gives voice to our problem in his play, *The Cocktail Party*. A young society leader named Celia is talking to a psychiatrist named Reilly. She is confessing that she has discovered a sense of sin in her life. Sin is not a familiar word to her. She explains that her upbringing had been “pretty conventional”. She had always been taught to disbelieve in sin. “Oh,” she says, “I don’t mean that it was never mentioned! But anything wrong, from our point of view, was either bad form, or was psychological.”

Isn’t that true of too many of us? Sin has become meaningless to us. We merely make mistakes or have moments of weakness or bad form or said or did things without thinking them through.

My Mother wasn’t a theologian. She never even had a chance to go to high school. She had to go to work at the age of 14 because her father had died and her mother had a newborn baby. But she taught me at the age of 8 or 9 the difference between a mistake and a sin. It was a rainy day and I was sitting in the living room with a friend. We started throwing a ball back and forth. Well, boys being boys, we started throwing it harder at each other. One of us missed catching it. It must have been him. The ball hit a lamp and it crashed to the ground. My friend jumped up and ran out the front door as my Mother came in from the kitchen. I said, “I’m sorry! It was an accident!” My Mother said, “I can see that. It was a mistake, an accident. I can forgive that. But, I can’t forgive the sin of disobedience. You were told not to play ball in the house. Only God can forgive your sin.”

The cross of Jesus Christ convicts us in this. Sin is no casual matter. Sin is the enemy of our bodies. Sin destroys marriages. Sin breaks up friendships. Sin demeans us, fills us with shame and guilt. Sin destroys our self-confidence and robs us of our destiny. Sin is the enemy of the good within us.

Perhaps that is why it had to be—the suffering and dying of Jesus on the Cross of Calvary—it reveals to us the awfulness of our sins and the awesomeness of God’s Love. Our challenge is to respond to so great a love by casting off the sins that so easily beset us, and to give our lives to Him who so freely and so generously gave His Life for us.