

**GOOD FRIDAY 2009**

**“REMBRANDT IN THE SHADOWS . . .”**

Text: “And all of His acquaintances who had followed Him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things.” -- Luke 23:49

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We all have heard the news about how one picture is worth a thousand words. Of course you might say that it depends on the picture: some would be worth far more than that and some worth next to nothing. For example, I think of the first note I received with a photograph of our first grandchild; or the school picture an eight year old brought home; or a Kodak Christmas greeting of a growing family far away; or of a picture of a son in Iraq or Afghanistan, or was it Normandy or Verdun? Or a photo of someone you love who is gone which turned up by accident as you rummaged through your dresser drawers.

It's great to be able to read words, but it is far better to look at a picture. I have never forgotten how a well known missionary told of the day the Communists were on their way to devastate the Chinese Village where their Mission was, which was leveled to the ground. The one thing she scurried about to find and carry away was her box of photographs: not her money, not her jewelry, not even her passport. One family I know in Florida used to store their 55 years of negatives in a huge old fire-proof safe.

It's different now, storing photographs these days, what with computers and the ability to transfer slides and photos to DVDs. My Peggy has been working furiously these past several months trying to upload the family slides from when our children were growing up, onto her computer – a yeowomen's task to be sure – and much appreciated by her husband. (That ought to get me a point or two.) Sometimes a picture is all you have left. Like I have a friend who carried around a worn out photo of his parents in his wallet for 34 straight years. Or the poor homeless man in Florida who cried for weeks when someone stole the only photograph he had of his mother.

Likewise, famous artists through the centuries have painted sights and scenes and people from their souls and psyches to show us what they see inside the world about us. Not much of a reality show really, but they still can touch our deepest feelings. You do not have to be Andy Warhol or Jackson Pollock or Picasso - each in his own strange way trying to unravel the mystery of life in their art work; it can just be you or yours. In fact most grandparents would rather have a scribbled chalk picture by their grandchild on their refrigerator in the kitchen, than have a Roy Lichtenstein print hanging in their game room.

I remember the day years ago when a father whose son was losing ground came to see me. He had some photographs of the boy: one as he graduated high school (fine and handsome) another near the end of his sophomore year in college; then a couple from each of the next few years after he had dropped out of school and "hit the wall." The changing images told the whole story. You could see what happened just by looking at the pictures. His hair grew longer, his beard shaggy, his eyes sank, his countenance fallen. Who knows why?

Well anyway, the Dad was bewildered and he didn't know what to do. I suggested one day that he show the pictures he had shown me to his son. It was amazing, almost like a miracle. It took a little while, but seeing for himself what was happening, the boy somehow managed to come to his senses, got hold of things, returned home, finished school, got married and long since has had his own family, now with grandchildren. Seeing is believing. There is a magical power in a picture.

It's true with Bible pictures too. The example I ask you to focus on with me this Good Friday Noon is a Rembrandt painting I saw in Munich (Germany) years ago. I wish I had a copy of it large

enough for you to see. Before I tell you about the painting, let me tell you a little about the artist. Rembrandt, the Dutch master, was born in 1606 in Leiden, into a lower middle class family. Incidentally, he died a pauper at the age of 63. Painters and artists are not generally skilled at making or keeping money. Sometimes art makes a person famous, but by then, too often they are gone. Few musicians, photographers, poets, or even preachers, ever die wealthy.

Rembrandt van Rijn was a deeply religious man. He had no formal Biblical training, but more than anyone else before or since, he adorned the life of Christ in his art. One of our prized books at home is an oversized volume called “Rembrandt and the Bible” always on our coffee table. As a young man, he was successful and thankfully, Frederick Henry, the Prince of Orange, commissioned him to paint some scenes from the life of Christ, which in turn became known as his great “Passion Cycle,” five in all, which hang in the Art Museum in Munich.

My favorite one is “The Raising of the Cross,” painted in 1633. The darkness of the approaching Good Friday afternoon storm is gathering all around. Rembrandt depicts the men straining to raise the cross, with Jesus on it. There is a circular arch above it, like a window we are looking into. In the background if you squint a little you can make out the other criminals who were about to be crucified with Jesus. But most of the light, of which Rembrandt was the Master, is focused on the Savior.

There, just on the level of the feet of Jesus, helping to lift the cross, is a face which looks familiar. You might miss it if you did not know what he looked like, but it does not take long to realize that the man there helping to crucify Jesus is a good likeness, a spitting image of Rembrandt himself. He painted himself into the scene, with a prominent part at Calvary. To his left there is another man staring directly out at us, questioning with his eyes whether we realize that not only Rembrandt and he were there, but all the rest of us too are part of the story.

Rembrandt often painted himself into his pictures. Marc Chagall did the same. In his case, each painting included his grandfather’s little house, the place of his beginning, as if he were pining for a simpler world. And my friend, Dick Labonte, up in New Jersey always includes his little signature person somewhere in his scenes. It is true to say that each artist or novelist or song writer or even preachers, are revealed in their creations. Usually you have to search for it, but in Rembrandt’s case he makes it plain as day; he wants you to know that he was a part of the scene.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read: “And all His acquaintances and the women who had followed Him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things.” (Luke 23:49) They were there, but they were not involved. They were watching but not helping, standing off at a distance. Not so with Rembrandt; he painted himself into the center of the action so everyone would know that he was there, at the Cross.

Well, I said a picture is worth 1,000 words. By now, at this point in the sermon, I really shouldn’t tell you, I have used up 837 words, as it was tallied by my computer – so in 163 words I should be done. I should leave well enough alone and sit down, but you know preachers well enough to know that is not likely to happen. Did you get the message – of how Rembrandt painted himself into the crowd of those who were there when Jesus was crucified?

The point of this Good Friday sermon is to teleport, to transfer ourselves into the scene. Rembrandt was there when they crucified the Lord. My question to you this Good Friday is “Were you there too? – Or more exactly, are you aware that you and I were there?” It was not the ancient Jews or the Roman conquerors who crucified our Lord; it was the sin of all the world around and all the world to come.

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If you read carefully, you can see that the four Gospel writers seem preoccupied, or at least overly concerned with the crucifixion, suffering and death of Jesus. One-third of the Gospel of Matthew concerns these events, the same with Mark, one-fourth of Luke. A full one-half of John’s Gospel is devoted to the last 24 hours of Jesus’ life on earth. Have you ever wondered why, why they were so possessed with the death of Jesus, even more than with the life of the Son of God?

Well, some commentators on the book of Mark have said from the beginning that the very reason the first Gospel was written was to explain why the one who was God Incarnate and who had the power to raise people from the dead could not/would not have saved himself. As the first generation of Christians were beginning to die out and the long line of eyewitnesses were less available for consultation, it was deemed necessary to have a written record of what Jesus said and did. And Mark was beginning to grow older, too.

The primary question which new converts were asking was, “Why did Jesus have to die? How does that make any sense? Gods are supposed to be powerful and victorious.” So Mark and the other two, and eventually John, decided to write down a record of what Jesus did and why he had to face such an agonizing end. The gruesome death of a beloved leader caused everybody to wonder. To explain it as part and purpose of the Lord God Almighty was mandatory. Hence they were concerned to emphasize that his death was not a defeat, but part of a victory from beyond the earth. The heavens confirmed what Jesus says all along the way of the Gospels – that God was not thwarted in the crucifixion of his Son, but that through it something grand and enduring was being accomplished.

There were other reasons why the suffering and death of our Lord was a primary subject. (1) First, there was the shock and bewilderment that a 33-year-old young man was dying. A young person’s death, particularly of a public nature, is not easily forgotten. Everybody old enough remembers where they were when Kennedy was shot. More recently, almost everybody can recall how he or she came to learn of the death of Princess Diana. Or most recently, we all stand in shock at the death of a bright young professor at Winthrop University and her two year-old daughter as they died in a ridiculous, speed-driven car crash. It is more memorable with the death of loved ones in your family or among your friends. The death of a young person is always a shock and has mysteries and lingering questions of its own.

(2) Secondly, we focus on it more if the one who dies is one you loved and needed. Usually, there are not many in that category, not many at all. A couple of family members maybe, a few friends, a secret love, a mother, a father. The world is never the same again after someone you love has died. The disciples’ world following the death of Jesus was not the same either. They loved him. He was the one they counted on and the one they needed. Of course they focused on His death and their

recovery. He was their all, their hope, their answer to life's meaning, and He was gone . . . why? And what happened next?

(3) Third, after the Resurrection, they were led to believe that His death had a quintessential importance in the eyes of God. In one way, it was their way of handling it. But it was more as a theological recovery than a personal one. And the question lingered: if He was the Son of God, why did he have to suffer and die on the cross? Did God lose; did death and Satan win? In other words they were struggling to give some kind of meaning to Jesus' death, just as, at a much higher level, we each and all struggle to make sense out of an untimely death. St Paul caught on quickly that the crucifixion had to be explained. In First Corinthians 15, and elsewhere, he searched out the simple message of the death and resurrection of Christ, relating it to the eternal purposes of God and his presence in the Son. "If Christ is not raised then our faith is in vain, and of all people we are to be the most pitied."

He died for our sins, not his own. In the universality of what we do and do not do to help the Lord, the penalty required for your sins and mine was paid by Him. He took your place. My place. Our place. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but shall have everlasting life."

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I close with a little story from closer to our time. Father Maximilian Kolbe whose biography is called, *A Man For Others*, died in the Auschwitz Nazi Concentration Camp during World War II. By the way, he was anointed as a Saint by Pope John Paul II on October 10, 1982. When Hitler began to exterminate the Polish Jews, Father Kolbe, a Roman Catholic, stood up for them. He didn't need to. Not many Christian leaders were courageous enough to risk the wrath of Hitler, just to save the Jews. But Father Kolbe did, excoriating the Third Reich leaders in his Parish pulpit but also out in the public square. Well, you might have guessed and Father Kolbe knew that they would arrest him and cart him off to the concentration camp, which they did. It was awful: because and just because he spoke out for innocent people, he was arrested and incarcerated, and bound in the Camp at Auschwitz.

Some time later in the Camp, on a whim, the prison guards decided to kill ten prisoners to punish the whole camp for some minor infraction by one of the prisoners – unfortunately a rather common occurrence as the war drew to a close. That day they chose their victims one by one, haphazardly, without rhyme or reason. One man chosen to die was terrified, screaming, "I don't want to die! Please someone spare me." The guards shouted derisively to the other prisoners: "Is there anybody here want to take his place so this poor devil can live?"

Father Kolbe stood up and walked forward to volunteer to die in his place. So they shoved the priest against the wall and tossed the still whimpering man back into the crowd. Then "Bang! Bang!! Bang!!!" So Maximilian died in another's place, shot to death, taking the place of a man he did not even know. The Bible says, "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." That's what Jesus did for you.

Somewhere in the shadows around the cross there is the face of someone else you know by name.

There is the Roman Centurion, the High Priests, the mother of Jesus and some other women, some Pharisees, maybe Joseph of Aramathea, John the Disciple. And, standing near the feet of Jesus, helping to lift the Cross is Rembrandt Van Rihn. Then, keep looking. See that one I mentioned staring out at you. Then there is somebody else you know, intimately. A reflection, a presence. Do you see him, her? Do you see yourself? "It is I Lord;" it is you and me and all of us and countless others, watching as the kind and loving One who is dying has taken our place, and in anticipation at least hanging there for all who will come and believe in him ever-after. Each of us was there somewhere: watching, listening, weeping as Jesus offered up His seven last words, one of which said: "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do." Just like Jesus to say something like that.

It's like looking in a mirror, for now and evermore... or at least until the next Easter morning. Amen.