

GOOD FRIDAY HOMILY – (Homily 06)
“Good Friday – Call to Radical Discipleship”
(Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9; Jn 18:1-19:42)

In a recent presentation at the Los Angeles Religious Educators’ conference, Ron Rolheiser, well known spiritual writer and speaker, sheds new light on the meaning of the passion and death of Jesus.

Influenced by St. John of the Cross, a mystic and master of the spiritual life, Rolheiser spoke of the three stages of life that flow from the age of puberty and on.

The first stage he calls Essential Discipleship. In this stage we leave home to establish ourselves in the world. We are occupied with discerning our vocation, choosing a career, finding a soul mate, discovering the purpose for our life. John of the Cross calls this stage the Dark Night of the Senses. Our struggle here is with the devil and the temptation to be selfish and self-centered.

The second stage is that of Generative Discipleship. Here we are occupied with living out our chosen career, making a home, raising a family, developing ourselves professionally, and doing all kinds of activity and works. John of the Cross calls this the stage of proficiency. We are busy giving our life away in all kinds of worthwhile projects.

The last stage is that of Radical Discipleship. This stage is often initiated by a loss, an illness, an unforeseen event. Our retirement plans might be short changed suddenly, and we are led where we did not plan to go. This stage is radically different, in that we stop being active, doing all kinds of things. Now things are done to us. This is the stage in which we are invited to learn how to give our deaths away. John of the Cross calls this stage the Dark Night of the Spirit. Surprisingly, this stage in which we may do very little, can be the richest time of our lives. Our struggle in this stage is not with the devil. It is with God, with the challenge to truly surrender our will to God.

Ron shared the story of his sister who was an Ursuline religious, dean of students at their High School. She loved her work, excelled at it, and was a great organizer and caregiver. In midlife she contracted cancer, was paralyzed from the waist down, could do very little, and eventually succumbed to the disease. He remarked that the lessons her family and friends learned as they accompanied her towards her final moments, were more profound than what she gave them during her life,

rich and exemplary as that was. After years of giving her life away, she learned to give her death away.

It is the same with Jesus. From the moment he began his public ministry to his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his life was full of generative activity, teaching, healing, and caring for the poor and the marginalized. But from the moment of his arrest in the garden that night, to his death on the cross, Jesus did not really do anything. Everything was done to him. He freely entered into his passion. The Latin word for that is *passio*, which has the meaning of being passive. This is an important and crucial stage of our lives, one that we are all invited to enter, one in which we are invited to learn how to give our lives away.

The Gospels make a point of carefully noting what happens right after Jesus dies on the cross. In the Synoptics the Temple veil is torn from top to bottom, there is an earthquake and some of the dead saints are seen walking about. It is different in the Gospel of John that we proclaimed today. One of the soldiers, seeing that Jesus is already dead, pierced his side with a lance and blood and water flow out.

We have been quick to interpret that action as a symbol of the sacramental life of the church, baptism and Eucharist, born out of Jesus' death on the cross. That is correct, but there is a more mystical meaning for John of the Cross. The blood and water symbolize for him the new energy, hope, encouragement and inspiration that flows out to those who believe in him because of his life and now the gift of his death. He had learned how to give his death away.

Rolheiser used the example of a very influential woman whose funeral took place at the Oblate School of Theology. There were three bishops, many priests and religious, and hundreds of friends and relatives who attended her funeral. The eulogy pointed out that she was a remarkable woman who had cared for the poor and rich alike. She had spent her life living the Gospel. The oldest daughter's comments, however, were striking. She told the younger family members that they would only *get who she was for them* after some years, but that they would finally understand who their aunt and grand-mother was for them. She was speaking of the gift of her death.

Rolheiser points out that when we leave the funeral of anyone who has lived an exemplary life, who has learned to give their life away, we go away invigorated, inspired, filled with new energy to live the way that person lived. That is the gift of the third stage of life well lived, radical discipleship.

That was the gift of the death of Jesus. He spent three full years in active, generative ministry, yet he accomplished more in the last twelve hours of his life, redeemed us more, saved us more by his passion and death than in those previous three years.

So it can be for us. We can wait for that stage of life to hit us suddenly, or we can choose to pre-empt it and enter into it freely, by choosing to give our death away, to live a project that will actually imitate what would happen if we had suddenly had a stroke or terminal illness.

An example of this is a couple who, after much reflection, sold their house and chose to go to a third world with no intention of coming back. They went as missionaries, fully aware that they would die there. Their family initially protested, but after their deaths, proclaimed to everyone what heroic parents they had. Their parents had learned to give their deaths away.

This spirituality is the best argument against euthanasia. Ending one's life artificially and prematurely is a temptation only to those who lack faith, who see no value in suffering, illness and pain. Jesus in his passion has shown us that the opposite is true. That is a time for radical discipleship, and can be the greatest gift that we can give to the world.

May our celebration of this Good Friday liturgy help us to reflect upon the meaning of our own life and death, and inspire us to even look forward to that third and meaningful stage of life, radical discipleship, the Dark Night of the Spirit, in which we learn to give our death away.