

Good Friday – Celebration of the Lord's Passion  
(Isaiah 52:13-53:12 / Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 / John 18:1-19:42)  
15.04.2017

Reading today's passion narrative – John's account of Christ's life-giving death – I am reminded of words pronounced by the late Dom Paul Grammont, former abbot of Bec, who received my monastic Profession. Let me share his words with you: *Remember always that your life as a monk* (I believe what he said has universal significance, so I would say here – *your life as a Christian*) *is to be lived in a vital constant relationship with all the varied ministries of the Church, Body of Christ. One unique Spirit, that of the Father and the Son, animates the whole of the Church. The diverse charisms in the Church are the multiple reflections of the seamless garment of the Saviour.* That reminder addressed to me on my Profession day, by one whom I consider to have been for me a real *Father in Christ*, remains an ever present inspiration in my life. It leads me to want to halt in this Good Friday meditation upon the following little remark found in the gospel account we have just read: *When the soldiers had finished crucifying Jesus they took His clothing and divided it into four shares, one for each soldier. His undergarment was seamless, woven in one piece from neck to hem; so they said to one another, 'Instead of tearing it, let's throw dice to decide who will have it'.* Allusion to the seamless robe of Christ in this Scripture verse might seem to some readers to be just an aside remark, but is what we have here to be thought of as a barely significant detail? I don't think so. I believe the evangelist's insistence upon Jesus' seamless robe has a profound symbolic significance.

Let's consider that significance...

Jesus' undergarment was evidently of particular value. It seems to have been tailored with extraordinary skill. It was no mean feat to weave a garment that was seamless from neck to hem. So precious was this tunic that the soldiers did not want to spoil it by tearing it to pieces.

It is sad to say that what the pagan Roman soldiers considerately thought it best to refrain from doing at the passion of Christ, Christian disciples have rather thoughtlessly done since then. Understand me. I am not just talking about the fact that it is claimed in various places that parts of the seamless robe of Jesus have been conserved to be venerated as relics. (There are many relic shrines in the world pretending to have a piece of Jesus' garment.) If we dare to believe in the authenticity of these multiple relics it is implied that Christians cut up Jesus' shroud and shared out the pieces. It is not this I am thinking of. What I am thinking of today is something much more scandalous than that. I am thinking of the pain of divisions and disunity in the Church.

The Church Fathers saw Christ's tunic as symbolic of the unity of the Church.

When we look at the Church today does what we see appear to be seamless, undivided, woven together all of one piece? The reality – something we must not only admit to be the case, but also accept our part of responsibility for – is that the seamless robe of Christ has been torn to pieces. It should be a source of profound sadness to us that Jesus' garment is torn to pieces by men and women who profess Christian faith.

We cannot deny that there is dissension among Christians. This is evident. Our divisions have not only torn Christ's robe into shreds, they continue to pull His body apart.

The torn garment of Christ, the broken Body of the Church, is nothing less than a scandal. It is more than just regrettable that Christians are perceived not only to fail to hold together, but to actually pull against one another in some respects. How sad that some people who claim to be *in Christ* are ready to claim that other professing Christians should not be truly

recognised as such.

We can say all we want in a bid to justify our respective theological positions, but to the ordinary person who looks at us from outside the Christian fold whatever we say here will mean little or nothing. They will only see our mutual oppositions. Our divisions will appear to them as a sign of contradiction – a counter-testimony to everything Christ to have stood for and what He still desires for all His disciples: unity, communion.

Jean Vanier wrote some years ago words that are as true today as when he first penned them. Indeed, they may be even truer today than when he first formulated his thought on this subject. I quote: *In our world the Christian Churches seem to many people to be irrelevant, for they are more a cause of division and of war than a source of unity and peace. To walk down a street and see the Baptist church, the Lutheran church, the Anglican church, the Presbyterian church, the Methodist church, the Roman Catholic church, this or that church, each one preaching its own Jesus, collecting money, building more buildings, defending its own frontiers. All this seems unbearable, intolerable hypocrisy!*

Maybe Vanier's remarks can seem pessimistic and lacking in some nuance, but they do express something we need to hear. Among other things they remind us that as disunited Christians we are not in the best position to challenge our increasingly divided and broken world – a world torn asunder in so many ways. However hard it is for us to admit this to be the case, the sad reality is that our world is in a sorry state. In today's world confidence is greatly lacking because of mutual suspicions. Our world is threatened by war. In many places people despair. Our world is governed by fear. So many people are enduring deep pain and real suffering. Our world is in some respects plunged into a chaotic state; it is dominated by greed and oppression and there are power struggles of all sorts going on in different corners of the globe. No wonder so many men and women feel despondent and without hope. It is not without cause that suicide rates are escalating and that this is affecting people right across the board.

Looking beyond the Church to the world in which we live, we would have to say that there are few seamless garments available to us in society. So many things are tearing apart at the seams! Our broken world stands in need of repair. If the Church is to fulfil her mission in the world's regard then she must first experience the restoration to which Christ calls us by means of the reconciliation He offers us through the cross. Today and every day we must listen to the Lord's call to repent and change our ways. The psalmist pleads with us: *Oh that today you would listen to His voice. Harden not your hearts.* If only we could hear those words as spoken to us by the Crucified – His heart opened, pierced by the lance, shedding His blood out of love for us.

Let us turn our attention once more to the consideration with which we started: namely, the value of the seamless garment of Christ. Given the robe's value (something borne witness to by the soldiers being ready to throw lots for it) and given what we know of Jesus' poverty, we can take it that this garment was a gift that had been especially made for Jesus. There is a strand of tradition that has seen Jesus' seamless robe as having been offered to Him by His mother Mary. In any case, we can take it that it would have been offered by one of Jesus' disciples – whether that disciple was the one whom we refer to as *the first of the disciples*, Mary, His mother, or some other close associate. Whoever it was who offered the garment the soldiers cast lots for, I hear a call addressed to us as Jesus' followers today. It is the call to weave a new seamless robe for the Master to replace the one first given to Him. As Christian people we can weave this new robe for Jesus by doing all that is within our power to overcome and bring to an end the divisions that mar the life of the Church, tearing Christ's body apart.

A first step on the way to this end would be for all of us to take to heart that reminder of Abbot Paul Grammont given to me on my Profession day. I believe those words the abbot first addressed to me are a call addressed to all of us today: *Remember always that your life is to be lived always in a vital constant relationship with all others in the One Body of Christ, the Church.*

Those words invite us to a greater consideration for each other in the Christian community; they summon us to a deeper mutual respect; they call upon us to engage ourselves with more commitment to work together for the building up of God's kingdom and the restoration of the unity of the Church. We must do that beginning in our own communities of life – with our families and other close associates.

It is together that we are called to form the seamless garment of the Saviour. The memory of the seamless robe of Jesus calls us to aspire to an undivided Church.

Today when we come forth to venerate the icon of the cross of Jesus, looking to the One who was stripped bare for crucifixion, let us pay heed to the words which the icon venerated in this monastic church depicts Him praying for us. The icon we will venerate depicts Jesus praying a line from His High Priestly Prayer in John 17. Jesus is portrayed as still living His sacred passion that all God's scattered children may be gathered together in His Body, the Church. On the icon we read Jesus' plea: *May all be one.*

So often we turn to the Lord, asking Him to hear our prayers. Today, let us take to heart the plea of the One who died for us. The response to Jesus' prayer – *that all may be one* – depends not only upon His Father, but also upon us. A called is addressed to us to allow the Lord to work upon our hearts to convert them to Himself and also to turn them more and more towards each other.