

GOOD FRIDAY 2024

The first person who died while I was present was my mother. I was 17 years of age. I was numb, I remember that I did not cry at the time, partly because I could not believe that this horrendous separation could happen so quietly and quickly, that people could go on with life as if nothing important had happened. I couldn't take it in. In any case I felt I had to hold it together for my father and sister.

Later that day however, the flood gates opened, and I thought they would never ever close. A combination of things released the pain, but I had picked up a hymn book and opened it randomly without much thought and my eyes alighted upon a hymn by Charles Coffin that had originally come from the Paris Breviary: *O quam juvat fratres, Deus* translated into English by Robert Bridges:

*Happy are they, they that love God,
Whose hearts have Christ confessed,
Who by His cross have found their life,
And 'neath His yoke their rest.*

It was the very last verse that was both my undoing and the beginning of healing:

*Then shall they know, they that love Him,
How all their pain is good;
And death itself cannot unbind
Their happy brotherhood.*

Sometime after my mother's death an aunt gave me a statue of Our Lady and said to me. "*You will feel the loss of your mother, so God is giving you another mother, you can always go to her, her heart is ever open to you.*" I have always gone to her, and true enough her heart has always been open to me, so I naturally went to this mother as I prepared this homily. The Gospel simply says, '*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother.*' I said to her, "*What was like for you standing, watching him die, it was bad enough for me a son watching my mother but what was it like for you a mother seeing them destroy the fruit of your womb?*" In the stillness of my heart, I heard: "*Heart wrenching.*"

“Heart wrenching”. After a while I asked: “*So how did you cope?*” Once again from deep within I heard: “*He was not my possession, He had come for you, this is how it had to be, this is how love heals.*” Heart wrenching. St John Paul II explains this in the beautiful encyclical, *Dives in misericordia* n9:

“Mary is the one who obtained mercy in a particular and exceptional way...she made possible with the sacrifice of her heart her own sharing in revealing God’s mercy...Her sacrifice is a unique sharing in the revelation of mercy...No one has experienced to the same degree as the Mother of the Crucified One, the mystery of the Cross...No one has received into his heart, as much as Mary did, that mystery, that truly divine dimension of the redemption effected on Calvary...Mary is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God’s mercy. She knows its price; she knows how great it is.”

How many times do we attempt on Good Friday to ‘explain’ the Cross, intellectually? As if all we need to do is to get the right words and then people will fully understand mystery of the cross. Yet I wonder if today’s liturgy invites us to ‘experience and embrace’ the Cross, not rationalise it. The sheer horror of this naked man, who after the scourging literally was a mass of blood, an open wound, no wonder people were disgusted as Isaiah writes, he appeared ‘*no longer human.*’ It is utterly scandalous therefore, that the central image of our faith should be the corpse of an executed criminal. Yet for Paul without the Cross, Christianity would be nothing more than a collection of cute sayings and good works, but through the cross, we are in Christ and Christ is in us – through it we are given the hope of glory.

The liturgy today therefore invites us to apply the medicine of the Cross to the wounds we carry. Liturgy, as I am sure Fr Cedd led you to understand this morning, liturgy takes us into the mystery we celebrate, and because Christ is alive, He is alive in the mysteries we celebrate. Through these mysteries, through the liturgy, God enters our lives, into our drama not just our minds and imaginations. Benedictine spirituality is a spirituality of encounter, it enables us to experience the living God here and now. We worship not an absent God or a dead Jesus, but a God who emerges from silence, unveils himself and makes himself known in the reality of life. Worship, liturgy is a lived experience of Christ, not merely a performance that seeks to move our hearts temporarily.

Today already we have heard His word proclaimed over us and into us. After the homily, which is an extension of Christ's healing presence we will pray in the power and promise of His Word for all our needs. The Cross will be brought into our midst, and we will venerate the Crucified and receive Him in Holy Communion. The Word is always made flesh in our lives. Jesus entered our world at the incarnation, to reach into our lives, He wanted to descend into our own hell, our confusion, insecurity, desire to control, self-seeking. He wanted to breathe His healing presence into us.

I spoke of this deep conviction yesterday evening; God wants to heal you, to bind up every wound. In fact, he wants to heal us more than we are ready to be healed. How much do you want to be healed? How strong is your desire to be free, to let go and surrender to Him? Those who were at Matins this morning, heard that beautiful reading from St John Chrysostom. Do you remember the question he asked: Do you want to know the power of His blood? So, let me take you out of your comfort zone. If you want to experience the healing power of the Cross, if you want to surrender to the medicine of His precious blood, then just raise your hands.

Let's take a moment therefore before we come to venerate the cross and receive Holy Communion to remember what Isaiah said so powerfully: *'...through His wounds we are healed.'* Through His presence within our wounds, we will find healing. The Letter to the Hebrews pointed us to the truth: *'We do not have a high priest who is incapable of feeling our weakness...Let us be confident, then in approaching the throne of grace.'* Do you hear this, do you believe this? The Passion, so beautifully sung, has already brought us to HIM. Hence the liturgy invites us: *'Behold the wood of the Cross'*. When you kneel in worship this is not a rubric that should be followed but a ready response to the greatest mystery – our salvation, our healing.

When you come then to venerate and receive the lamb of God what sorrow, sin, bodily or emotional pain are you going to allow to be covered in His precious blood? Who are you going to set free because you are still not willing to forgive? From whom do you need ask forgiveness? There can be no freedom, no healing without forgiveness. What secret are you

carrying that Mary, Mother of Mercy now says to you: *'Give it to Him? Do whatever he tells you?'*

He is looking at you now and His piercing gaze will look into your heart and soul when you come to venerate and receive Him. He wants you free. He wants you healed; He wants to cover you with His outrageous love. Do you believe this? Will you step out in faith? Will you risk leaving this liturgical encounter different?

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