

Equilibrium in Prayer on the Road to Healing and Wholeness

A Retreat for those involved in Mental Health Pastoral Care

Tuesday

Talk 3 – The Cross of Christ

Introduction

“The Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.’”¹

The Cross is a key theme in our Christian lives, yet how do we relate to it? What place does it have in our lives? Is it something that we avoid, or even ignore? Or do we feel that a Cross has been placed upon our shoulders and is too heavy for us?

It is these questions that we shall seek to explore a little over these next few minutes because, paradoxically, the Cross is central to our journey, to our healing and our wholeness in Christ.

The frightfulness of the Cross

Perhaps you have seen the film, ‘The Passion of the Christ’. It portrays the passion of Christ in all its ghastliness. The pain and suffering undergone by the Saviour is there for all to see and, for many, it is a sight that is too much to contemplate. Some find the very naturalistic art that is so common in Spain to be too much for them. The Grunwald Crucifix places before us the absolute desolation of the crucifixion. These are all frightful images and we would naturally wish to avert our eyes, to cover our faces, to move away. Perhaps this is right, for in our ‘gut reaction’ to the sufferings of Jesus there is, perhaps, the faintest awareness that it is our sins that put him there.

I remember some years ago, celebrating the Easter Triduum in Belmarsh Prison. Never has the Good Friday Liturgy hit home so much. It was very clear to me that for some of the inmates, the liturgy was a truly moving and transforming experience. The way in which they were attentive to the reading of the Passion, their devotion in venerating the Cross, was astounding. I was surprised by this and, in my surprise judged these men unfairly. I began to reflect that they were very much aware – even though they would not have expressed it in very theological language – that they had caused the events we were remembering.

We must remember this and there is a danger that we can pass by the crucifix all too easily. We have them on the walls of our houses, the crucifix is there in all our churches, – how often do we really look at it, reflect upon the sufferings of Christ. Maybe it is because something deep within us recoils from the facts of the passion, maybe it is because we fail to notice something that is just there all the time. Has the cross that we wear simply become an item of jewellery? Is it not something more than that – a proclamation of our faith and a reminder to us of the Lord who died for us. Perhaps the recent issues over the wearing of Muslim dress for women might remind us that this little item of dress says something about what we believe. What would happen if a ban was put on the wearing of the Cross?

¹ Mt. 16:21-23.

So, the Cross is something that fills us with dread, at least on one level. The mystery of the Cross takes us further, however, for we know that it is through the Cross that victory over sin and death has been won for us.

“His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are;
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”²

Through Death comes victory and Jesus calls everyone to himself from the Cross:

“The Son of Man must be lifted up
as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so that everyone who believes may have eternal life.”³

St. Peter speaks of the effects of the suffering of Christ as the means by which we are called home, in a text redolent of Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John, about the shepherd and the sheep:

“Christ suffered for you and left you an example to follow the way he took. He had not done anything wrong and there had been no perjury in his mouth. He was insulted and did not retaliate with insults; when he was tortured he made no threats but he put his trust in the righteous judge. He was bearing our faults in his own body on the cross so that we might die to our faults and live for holiness; through his wounds you have been healed. You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”⁴

Peter’s words are something of a challenge for us: we are called to follow the way that he took – a path from which we would shrink, a path nobody would naturally wish to take. Do we really want to take the way of Christ, or it demands that we take up the cross and following the road to Calvary.

I have had the privilege of taking many groups on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In 1990, I took a small group from the parish. We hired a bus and I did the driving and guiding. We began in the Galilee, where the weather was lovely, the churches and their gardens peaceful. We picnicked on

² Phil. 2:6-11.

³ Jn. 3:13.

⁴ 1Pet. 21-24.

the side of the lake and read the scriptures. When the time came to leave and head up to Jerusalem a number of pilgrims objected. We do not want to go there, they said. This was more than a wish to stay in a pretty place than go to the busy city – they were explicit in saying that they did not want to go to the place of crucifixion. It was a necessary part of the journey. Without Calvary, the Pilgrimage would not have made sense, for Calvary takes us to the Resurrection.

The place of Suffering

Suffering is a great mystery for humanity. How can I make sense of suffering in my life or in the lives of others. How can we answer the challenge of the holocaust, the gulag, the natural disaster, the child who is dying in hospital. I would not be alone in saying that the hardest thing for a priest is the burial of a child. The Psalm of Desolation – Psalm 87 – will resonate with us at such times. It may even be a companion for much of our lives:

Lord my God, I call for help by day,
I cry at night before you.
Let my prayer come into your presence,
O turn your ear to my cry.

For my soul is filled with evils;
my life is on the brink of the grave.
I am reckoned as one in the tomb;
I have reached the end of my strength.

Like one alone among the dead;
like the slain lying in their graves;
like those you remember no more,
cut off, as they are, from your hand.

You have laid me in the depths of the tomb,
in places that are dark, in the depths.
Your anger weighs down upon me,
I am drowned beneath your waves.

You have taken away my friends
and make me hateful in their sight.
Imprisoned, I cannot escape;
my eyes are sunken with grief.

I call to you, Lord, all the day long;
to you I stretch out my hands.
Will you work your wonders for the dead?
Will the shades stand and praise you?

Will your love be told in the grave
or your faithfulness among the dead?
Will your wonder be known the dark
or your justice in the land of oblivion?

As for me, Lord, I call to you for help:
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
Lord, why do you reject me?
Who do you hide your face?

Wretched, close to death from my youth,
I have borne your trials; I am numb.
Your fury has swept down upon me;
your terrors have utterly destroyed me.

They surround me all the day like a flood,
they assail me all together.
Friend and neighbour you have taken away:
my one companion is darkness.⁵

How do we find the way when it seems that our one companion is darkness; when God seems a million miles away? How can we find meaning in all of this?

“You ask ‘Why, why, why?’ and rightly so. Look at the cross, venerate it, embrace it in your prayer. Jesus had to go through darkness, pain and death so as to give meaning to our darkness, pain and our death. But more than this: suffering and death become friends because through them we have received new life which will be ours now and after death, and for always.”⁶

Suffering and Death – consequences of the Fall of humanity – are given meaning through the Passion and Death of Christ. Through his Resurrection we are given new life. The path to this new life is a hard one, very often. It is a hard road that leads to life. This we know already. The Cross will come our way – we do not need to go looking for it! Every one of us has had to face the cross in one way or another. We all carry a cross of some sort. Perhaps it is the cross of illness, bereavement, responsibility. Perhaps it is care for a sick relative. Here at Mount St. Bernard, one of the monks has dementia and he is cared for by another monk, who happens to be his own nephew.

So, sometimes we carry our own cross. Sometimes, like Simon of Cyrene, we are called to help another carry their cross:

“They enlisted a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross.”⁷

The call that each one of us receives to embrace the cross is a call to holiness! Sometimes, though, this is very hard to see. We might be in the depth of depression – a depression so dark that we cannot see our way out of it. The pain of our sickness may be so intense that all sense is lost. A burden of responsibility may feel so heavy that we think we can carry it no further; we feel crushed. In the darkest of those moments, Jesus is with us.

⁵ Ps. 87.

⁶ HUME, B., The Mystery of the Cross, London Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000, p.14.

⁷ Mk. 15:21.

Living at the foot of the Cross

A few years ago, I was on holiday in France. I was due to go with friends, a married couple who I have known for many years. The husband, however, had been ill and felt unable to travel – so, in the end, I went alone. I took the route that the three of us had planned, to the French Alps and to the Grande Chartreuse, the mother house of the Carthusian Order. It is not a monastery you can visit – there is a sign on the door requesting that you don't knock. As it turned out, I would drive each day from the little hotel in the village in the next valley, park at the bottom of the hill and walk past the monastery to spending time in reading and prayer, walking in the forest and sitting on a bench, on the edge of the forest above the monastery. This time was a real gift – a retreat I was not expecting.

Above the monastery there is a little mountain pasture on the edge of the forest and in the middle of the pasture is a great Calvary – not unlike the one outside this monastery. At the bottom of the cross a plaque has been fixed, bearing the words 'Vous etes ici' – "You are here".

We do well to live at the foot of the Cross. When the Cross comes to us it will give meaning to our darkness and pain.

"You may feel wretched, overcome, sad, bewildered – but go on looking at the crucifix and it will tell you its secret. We shall understand that suffering and pain, and death as well, have now a special dignity and value precisely because Christ, who is God, experienced them."⁸

When we are called, like Simon of Cyrene, to action for another, by beginning at the foot of the Cross, our action will be properly grounded and will come from the right place – from the self-giving of Christ and we shall be prevented from pride.

A monk once said to me, 'The Lord wasn't doing much on the cross.' This may seem a scandalous thing to say. But, in the human sense it is true. The suffering, humanly speaking, was pointless. He was inactive, he could not move, he spoke few words. In itself, crucifixion is not productive.

Yet, at the most profound level, Jesus was doing everything. He gave himself up for us. In his suffering, he suffers with us – and with every person of every time and place who suffers. His suffering transforms our suffering. His suffering brings life.

The Cross, then, is not just a place of suffering. It is that, in the most profound way – but it also a place of consolation and a place of action. Mary and Martha, the sisters of Bethany, are here with us. We contemplate the Cross and find consolation with Mary. We learn from the Cross and with Martha, it becomes the foundation for our action and our service.

Spend time this afternoon at the Calvary. Spend time at the foot of the Cross. Go on looking and it will tell you its secret.

⁸ HUME, B., op cit, p.16.