



The Catholic
Archdiocese
of Edmonton

Every Life Matters Easter Series

Session 4

The Mystery of Suffering

My paternal grandmother died of Alzheimer's disease. She suffered with this illness for twelve long years. My grandfather and the whole family, of course, also suffered along with her, each in our own way. I can still remember visiting my grandfather at his home one morning for coffee. I was a seminarian at the time. We talked about a whole number of things, as we usually did, including Nan. At one point he glanced up over his coffee cup, and looking me straight in the eye he said, "Why?" It seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was obviously something he had been struggling with deeply for a long time. I'll never forget that. I'll also never forget not knowing what to say. The words just weren't there. And, you know, for my grandfather that didn't matter. I realized that he just needed to give expression to his grief, to lament. What did matter to him was that I was there, able to listen.

In my nearly twenty-nine years of priesthood I don't know how many times I have been with people in similar situations. Time and again that question gets posed; "Why?" Time and again, words fail. Yet what I have also found to be consistently true is that the posing of the question seeks not so much an answer as a presence. In Jesus, both come together. Remember St. John Paul II: "Jesus Christ is the answer to the question of every human life." He is the answer to the question of suffering and he is very near.

Let's consider this for a few moments. Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became a human being, like us in all things but sin. He came to us to preach the good news of the nearness and love of God and the divine will to save us. As he moved among us and taught, he showed a special love for those who suffer. Over and over we hear in the Gospel of the many miracles of healing he worked for those who were sick. At the same time, however, he did not remove suffering entirely from our human condition. Instead, he took it upon himself, entering fully into the mystery.

This was on clear display in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane and at Calvary. Think of the night of his arrest. Aware of his impending physical suffering, and weighed down by the burden of what was about to unfold, Jesus cast himself down in deep, fervent prayer as he endured his agony of soul. He poured his entire self into his prayer to his Abba, his Father. He asked that the cup of suffering be taken away. I don't want this! Recall, too, that immediately afterward he was deserted by the disciples. He was arrested and taken to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest. There he awaited trial. The Gospels don't tell us what happened in the nighttime hours between his arrest and trial, but today pilgrims can visit an ancient dungeon discovered beneath the site of the High Priest's house. It is clear that this is the place where Jesus was kept throughout the night, probably subject to torture and certainly abandoned by all. He was totally bereft of companionship in his darkest of hours within the blackest of places. I've stood in that same place deep beneath the earth and it brings home very powerfully the depth of Christ's suffering, which next day reached its horrifying climax in his crucifixion.

So, all that we experience when we suffer - fear, loneliness, abandonment, pain - was felt, too, by Jesus. Truly he has entered into full solidarity with the suffering of his brothers and sisters. In and through all that he endured he entrusted himself entirely into the Father's hands and surrendered fully to his will. He offered his own suffering to the Father through his death on the Cross, confident that the Father would accept it for the salvation of the world. This is exactly what the Father did by raising Jesus from the dead.

The self-offering of Jesus on the Cross teaches us that when we offer our suffering through him to the Father, we can have confidence that God will accept and transform it into an instrument for good. In many ways, the mystery of suffering remains just that - a mystery. If in faith we offer it to God it is never without meaning or purpose. From Jesus we also learn that we are never alone in our suffering. God draws near. His special love for the sick and his acts of healing call us, too, to be close to any who are suffering and strive to lessen their pain whenever possible.

Now, suffering is broader, of course, than physical pain. Standing in solidarity with a loved one who is suffering or dying, and watching them while we are powerless to help, strikes at our own hearts and engenders an anguish every bit as painful as physical torment. What does our faith teach us about this? We're disciples, how do we confront this type of suffering as followers of the Lord? Let's turn to Mary. No one knew this better than Mary, the mother of Jesus. When she presented her infant son in the Temple, the prophet Simeon foretold that a sword would pierce her soul. This prophecy came true as she stood at the foot of the Cross. It is impossible for words fully to capture the depth of her anguished response to the death of her son. Yet it is important that we somehow grasp this, since Mary shows us what it truly means, as a disciple of Jesus, to be with, to walk with and to hold those who are suffering or nearing the end of their lives, especially our loved ones. If words cannot help us, perhaps art can.

What is to my mind the most sublime of all Michelangelo's works is the masterpiece that we know as the Pietà. In 1497 the artist was commissioned to do this work, which can be viewed today inside St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Let's take a few minutes with the image.

The scene is that of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of her son after it was taken down from the cross and before being placed in the tomb. What is depicted here is an extraordinary joining together of utter devastation and graceful acceptance, of a holding on and a letting go. Take a look at her hands. At the left of the image, Mary's right hand is holding up the body of Jesus. This is the hand of a mother at the moment she is confronted with the tragic reality of the death of her son. It is a hand that naturally clings, unwilling to acknowledge, not wanting to let go. At the right of the image, look at her left hand. It is away from the body and opened upward. This is the hand of the disciple, surrendering her son in trust to the will of the Father. These are different attitudes. What brings them together as a unified whole, it seems to me, is the cloth and her face. Notice the piece of cloth between her right hand and the body of Jesus. She is holding the body without her hand actually touching it. This symbolizes the sacredness of the Lord's body. He is Mary's son but also the Son of the Father. He belongs to her, yes, but this belonging must yield to a higher transcendent truth. He is the Son of God, now about to return to the Father.

This is reflected in the painfully exquisite unity of sadness and serenity in the face of the Virgin. She who once gave her fiat - let it be done - to the annunciation of Jesus birth must now also give her fiat to the fact of his death.

Echoing in the background of this excruciating moment are the words by which St. Elizabeth spoke of Mary at the Visitation: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). Mary never wavered from her trust that God would do what he promised. Recall from our second session that Adam and Eve were tempted away from this trust by believing a lie. Mary never surrendered to the lie; she remained in the truth, always trusting that there would be a fulfillment of God's promise, even at this moment when things could not possibly get worse! And there was a fulfillment! Her son was raised from the dead! God is faithful. God is worthy of our trust.

The Italian word *Pietà* means pity, compassion, mercy. Fiat means "let it be done". These two words capture in summary form the Christian approach to suffering. *Pietà*, or mercy, expresses the attitude that is ours toward any persons in pain or need. It calls us out of ourselves and towards the other to walk with them, suffer with them, stand with them in solidarity. Fiat is our surrender in faith to the truth, wisdom and love of God, to the mystery of his saving action in our suffering and in that of loved ones, and to the destiny that awaits his beloved children at the time of their death.

Suffering hits us all. To seek a life without it is unrealistic. Some today are seeking to run from it, to end it by ending the one suffering. It is said that suffering diminishes dignity, and that to die with dignity, therefore, one must die without suffering. Yet dignity is not something we assign to one another on the basis of health or some other capacity. Dignity is inherent, rooted in our identity as children of God, beloved of the Father. When we open our hearts to Jesus as presence in our pain and answer to our question, our eyes can view things as they truly are. In Christ we see that suffering in no way diminishes human dignity. On the contrary, when suffering is embraced in faith and offered as a gift to God for the sake of others, that dignity shines forth and the nobility of the human person is made manifest. May Mary our mother help us by her prayers to accept with faith, serenity and hope any suffering that we must endure.

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