

Good Friday

In his Rule, St Benedict says that every time we begin a good work we should pray to Him to bring it to completion. So, as we begin this second conference of the retreat, let us take a moment of silence in which to commend ourselves to the Lord.

Somehow in the Christian mystery, love and suffering seem to go together. At first sight, this hardly seems attractive: why would a God of love allow, or one might even say when thinking of Jesus' experience of what we now call Maundy Thursday and Good Friday require, suffering as part of the human condition and a necessary step on the way to union with Him? As we all know, the existence of evil and suffering in the world has caused many to question not simply the existence of a good God, but the existence of God at all – and it is not difficult to see why – and, yet, when we read the Scriptures or look at the lives of the saints, or perhaps reflect on our own lives in the light of these examples, there is something, or so it seems, that still nevertheless impels us to maintain our faith and hope in a loving God. This truly is a mystery, and one which we will never fully fathom in this life, though we might experience something of it and find over time, and upon mature reflection – perhaps with the aid of a spiritual guide – that our faith, hope and our love have been deepened, purified even, by our encounters with difficulty and pain.

Yesterday, we recalled Jesus' humble service of his brethren, giving them an example to follow in washing their feet, and instructing them to love other people in the way in which he has loved them – the 'new commandment.' We remembered the way in which at the Last Supper he identified the bread and wine of the meal with his own body and blood, offered for the redemption of mankind, identifying himself with the Passover Lamb and pointing ahead to his own sacrificial death on the Cross, preceded by his prayer and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately before his arrest. We recognise in these events a

supreme act of love, of obedience to his Father's will, and of self-sacrifice as Jesus gave himself up to suffer for undeserving people in fulfilment of the prophecies of the Messiah.

In the Liturgy today, we will hear one of these prophecies, as foretold by Isaiah. It is a text that is well known to us, but it is one that repays some reflection, especially because of its somewhat paradoxical nature.

It is a text that speaks of great suffering:

As the crowds were appalled on seeing him – so disfigured did he look that he seemed no longer human.

A thing despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.

Harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly.

He was torn away from the land of the living... struck down in death.

It was a real and terrible suffering, and yet not one without purpose:

He offers his life in atonement.

Letting himself be taken for a sinner, while he was bearing the faults of many and praying all the time for sinners.

And, quite remarkably, we also read in the text:

See, my servant will prosper, he shall be lifted up, rise to great heights.

His soul's anguish over he shall see the light and be content.

Hence I will grant whole hordes for his tribute, he shall divide the spoil with the mighty, for surrendering himself to death.

We have, perhaps, become very used to this text – after all, we hear it read every year at the Solemn Liturgy on Good Friday – and to the idea of the Messiah as the 'Suffering Servant', the Jewish authorities and even the disciples having failed to

grasp this. And, yet, its message is one that should cause us to think again: salvation lies in self-sacrifice, in humility, in obedience to God's will, in the patient endurance of suffering for the love of God and for others. The paradox in the text is that this way of suffering and humility leads not to misery and obliteration, but to exaltation – in the end, we might say, to holiness.

This afternoon, we will hear St John's account of Jesus' Passion, and he gives us a very particular account of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, differing from the accounts provided by the other three evangelists by omitting Jesus' prayer to his Father. St Mark recounts the event as follows:

They came to a small estate called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Stay here while I pray.' Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and keep awake.' And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. 'Abba (Father)!' he said, 'Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it.' He came back and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Had you not the strength to keep awake one hour? You should be awake, and praying not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again, he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came back and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy; and they could find no answer for him. He came back a third time and said to them, 'You can sleep on now and take your rest. It is all over. The hour has come. Now the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up! Let us go! My betrayer is close at hand already.'

If the ultimate purpose of the Christian life is union with God – the vision of God, of which the Beatitudes speak, that will be granted to the pure in heart – and, if the

means to this is allowing ourselves to be conformed to Christ, then, here in Gethsemane, we have a powerful example of faith, hope and love to imitate. St Mark describes for us Jesus' resignation to his Father's will, though - as we have no doubt found for ourselves on occasion – not without some struggle. St Luke in his account speaks, as does St Mark, of Jesus' fear and sorrow, saying that 'his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood', and of his need for support from his closest disciples (even if they were not quite up to the task), whilst St Matthew also emphasises Jesus' self-abandonment to God's will, 'My Father... if this cup cannot pass by without my drinking it, your will be done!'

The psalm that we will hear at today's Liturgy could be voicing Jesus' prayer in the garden, and provides us with a way of uniting ourselves with Our Lord in his sufferings, and on occasion, as circumstances demand, bringing to him in our prayer our own difficulties and trials.

In you, O Lord, I take refuge.

In your justice, set me free.

I say, 'You are my God.'

My life is in your hands.

Save me in your love.

Be strong, let your heart take courage, all who hope in the Lord.

And for us – and for Christians throughout the ages – this is the point of comfort. Whilst the Christian life (in fact, any human life) inevitably has its difficulties, its trials, its moments of suffering – at times for some people desperate suffering – our God, in Jesus, is with us in them all, and He can bring good from them. As St Paul wrote to the Romans, 'We know that by turning everything to their good God cooperates with all those who love him, with all those he has called according to his purpose.' Our part, then, is to follow Jesus' example and to give ourselves up to God, as best we can, in humility, faith, hope and love.

The author to the Letter to the Hebrews understood this point precisely. We will hear this extract this afternoon at the Liturgy, but it is a text worth giving a little time to now as well:

Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heaven, we must never let go of the faith that we have professed. For it was not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin. Let us be confident, then, in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help.

During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his voice was heard. Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation.

So, Jesus provides us with an example to imitate, a model of fidelity to God, having experienced the depths of what it is to be human, to be just as we are; and is also our intercessor, the High Priest, who takes the sacrifice of ourselves, of our love, to God the Father, making it acceptable through his suffering, death and resurrection. That the text says that Jesus 'learnt to obey through suffering' and was thus 'made perfect' indicates something of the path that we must also pursue if we are to follow him to glory, to 'eternal salvation'. In other words, we will also have our own moments in the Garden of Gethsemane that will lead us to Calvary.

They led him out to crucify him. They enlisted a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, who was coming in from the country, to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull.

They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he refused it. Then they crucified him, and shared out his clothing, casting lots to decide what each should get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The inscription giving the charge against him read; 'The King of the Jews'. And they crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.

The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads and said, 'Aha! So you would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days! Then save yourself: come down from the cross!' The chief priests and the scribes mocked him among themselves in the same way. 'He saved others', they said, 'he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross now, for us to see it and believe.' Even those who were crucified with him taunted him.

When the sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?' which means, '*My God, my God, why have you deserted me?*'

When some of those who stood by heard this, they said, 'Listen, he is calling on Elijah.' Someone ran and soaked a sponge in vinegar and, putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink saying, 'Wait and see if Elijah will come to take him down.' But Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The centurion, who was standing in front of him, had seen how he had died, and he said, 'In truth this man was a son of God.'

In this life, suffering and death are inevitable, but they are not the end. Like the evangelists who wrote their gospels in the light of Easter Sunday, we know that this moment of Jesus' death as recorded here by St Mark was not the end, and we also know that St John gives Jesus' final words on the cross as 'It is accomplished', indicating some purpose to it. From St Mark's account of the crucifixion, we learn just how Jesus suffered, both physically and mentally, his last words indicating a

sense of isolation from God, a real sense of desperation and abandonment, known also to some of the saints – and perhaps to some degree by some of us, who in times of real difficulty might have experienced the all-too-powerful temptation to doubt. But, Jesus’ self-abandonment to God was not futile, and whilst his human experience of the moment seems to have been one of desolation, he was nevertheless able to voice a prayer – ‘My God, my God’ being his first words – and an inner sense of the reality of God, such as he had in the Garden of Gethsemane, is perhaps testified to by his choice of words for this prayer, these being the opening words of Psalm 22 which indeed begins, ‘My God, my God, why have you deserted me?’, but develops into a hymn of praise and trust, concluding, ‘And my soul will live for him, my children serve him; men will proclaim the Lord to generations still to come, his righteousness to a people yet unborn. All this he has done.’ So, once again, we see a connection between the patient endurance of suffering as an act of sheer faith, and something being achieved in us and for us by God. Christ the High Priest of the Letter to the Hebrews, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, in giving himself up entirely to God’s will in an act of supreme love has brought about the real possibility for us of salvation, of eternal life with God in heaven. The trouble for us is to understand the connection between suffering and love, and what this means for our faith.

Traditional theology has sought to provide some explanation of this in theodicies, those of St Irenaeus of Lyon and St Augustine of Hippo being prime examples, and modern writers have also sought to understand this aspect of the Christian life and faith. Whilst many of these attempts do provide insights into this mystery, it does not seem that either individually or taken together they are wholly successful. In the end, the only really satisfying answer, it would seem, is to be found in Christ, and in trying to grasp what we can of the meaning of this, we could do worse than turning to St John of the Cross.

To some extent, John’s thought is complex, and there are a number of complicated books about him, as well as various translations of his works. But, some of his

points can also be made very simply; and we saw yesterday something of what we might think of as a parallel experience that John had to Jesus' on the Cross as recounted by St Mark, namely that he was able to re-edit and hold to the reality described in his poem, 'The Living Flame', which related his most intimate experience of God, whilst at the same time saying that his soul was in a spiritual desert, when his spirit was barren and faith seemed unreal.

John used the word 'night' to describe suffering, and we might connect this to the darkness that fell at the sixth hour at Jesus' crucifixion. John does not minimize suffering and the impact that it can have upon people – he knew plenty of it himself - but he does teach that we can meet suffering creatively if after the pattern of Jesus we meet it in faith; this is different from saying that God causes suffering, even for a good purpose. – we simply have to accept its inevitability as part of the Christian mystery.

God acts in our lives in different ways. Occasionally, He allows us to experience something of Himself, and even to be aware of how He is acting through us. But, at other times – as was Jesus' experience – He remains more or less hidden, sometimes completely hidden, and then painfully so. Yet, one of the purposes of this hiddenness would seem to be to bring about our growth in faith, enabling us to learn to more and more to put our trust in God alone. Elsewhere in the Letter to the Hebrews, the author speaks of a suffering caused by a stripping away from our lives of the things that do not belong to God, a suffering that might arise out of the circumstances of our lives and from which God appears to be entirely absent. We might understand this to be the 'pruning' that Jesus talks about in St John's Gospel, having described himself as the vine and us, his disciples, as the branches.

For John, when we encounter night, this is a time to make a positive choice for God, and in love for Him alone. The night is a place of deep encounter with God that occurs at a level which we do not perceive – though later on we might see its

fruit – and is actually a place of healing and spiritual growth, our desires during this experience being purified by Him and our hearts being made whole. Whilst it might take some degree of spiritual maturity, not to say holiness, to speak of this experience, as the Letter to the Hebrews does, as a ‘joy’, nevertheless we might with the benefit of hindsight and the assistance of grace be able to look back at such moments as times of blessing and spiritual growth. At such times, according to John, the God of love, who in Jesus as Hebrews tells us shared our humanity so as to redeem us, is acting in a hidden and mysterious way to make us more deeply aware of our absolute need for Him, as He draws us ever closer to Himself in the darkness of faith. In the same way as the tomb is the place of both Jesus’ burial and rising to life, night is a place of loss and suffering, whilst at the same time being the place of the resurrection. At the Easter Vigil, the Exultet will proclaim a night that is truly blessed, a night which will give way to the radiant dawn of resurrection light, but also one that begins in darkness.

The idea that we saw in Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering Servant of humiliation leading to exaltation or, put another way, of allowing ourselves to be conformed to Christ and through him to the Father’s will by an experience of night, which strips us of our self-importance and the preoccupations that obstruct our way to God, is also found in the monastic tradition’s teaching about humility, the topic that merits the longest chapter in St Benedict’s *Rule*; and it also begins with a paradox:

Brothers, divine Scripture calls to us saying: *Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted...* if we want to reach the highest summit of humility, if we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life, then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw *angels descending and ascending*. Without doubt, this descent and ascent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility. Now the ladder erected is our life on earth, and if we humble our hearts the Lord will raise it to heaven.

For St Benedict, the perfectly humble monk (and this would be true of any Christian) is one in whom God has been so able to work as to bring about the purity of their heart or, as we might also say, the fulness of personal integration; he is one who has simply be made whole, indeed has become holy. Benedict identifies twelve steps to this ladder of perfection, the fourth of which resonates with Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane and on Calvary:

The fourth step of humility is that under difficult, unfavourable, or even unjust, conditions, his heart quietly embraces suffering and endures it without weakening or seeking escape.

Do we not hear in this an echo Jesus' words, 'Take this cup away from me. But, let it be as you, not I, would have it.'? Benedict recognises that in the Christian life there will be times that we are called to imitate and to share in Jesus' passion, and that when this happens we should respond in faith and love, as he says, 'for the Lord's sake.'

Benedict's description of the perfect monk in his twelfth step of humility does not on first reading appear very attractive, but a closer consideration of the text and his teaching reveals that he is describing one who has come genuinely to know his need of God, a need that has been learnt through encounters with suffering and the consequent realisation of his powerlessness to live the Christian life, the life to which he has been called, without God's constant aid.

The twelfth step of humility is that in his body as well as in his heart a monk always manifests humility to those who see him. That is true at the Work of God, in the oratory, the monastery garden, on a journey, in the fields, or anywhere else. Whether he sits, walks, or stands, his head is to be always bowed and his eyes fixed on the earth. At every hour regarding himself as guilty because of his sins, let him consider himself already at the fearful judgement of God. Let him always say in his heart what the publican in the

Gospel said, his eyes fixed on the earth: 'Lord, I am a sinner. I am not worthy to raise my eyes to heaven.'

This description of a humble bearing, reflecting a recognition of one's sinfulness and one's total dependence upon God, is not however a picture of dejection and worthlessness. It is, rather, for Benedict, an exaltation of God's gratuitous love for human beings that has now become known to the monk as a result of personal experience, who has come to know not only his need for God, but also God's unconditional and overwhelming love for him, knowing, unworthy as he is, that his sins have been forgiven. This becomes clearer as the chapter on humility continues:

Now, therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear. Through this love, all that he used to observe somewhat fearfully he will now begin to fulfil without effort, as though naturally, from habit, [He will act] no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, from good habit itself and delight in virtue.

So, as we remember today in the Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we might reflect on the inevitability of suffering in our lives, something from which Jesus himself, having become in every way as we are, was not shielded. Rather, his own sufferings provide us with a model of how to respond in faith when we encounter difficulties and trials, in the belief that this night of suffering from which God seems to be absent is paradoxically a place of deep encounter with Him – as it was for Jesus on the Cross. Humility opens us to receive what God desires to give, and our acceptance of temptation and suffering helps us to learn and really to accept our absolute and ultimate dependency upon Him, and so to recognise His love for us. This growth is painful and its experience hardly welcome, but it is nevertheless a sharing in the experience of Christ, and as we share in this and become ever more conformed to him, our lives are slowly

transformed, and the love of God grows within us. Thankfully, this is not our sole experience of the Christian life – but it is a real part of it, for all of us – but if we can allow God to work in us at these times, we can be sure of the end result: God Himself. St Benedict provides us with a summary:

As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.

Glory be to the Father...