



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Suffering love

Readings: Jeremiah 20: 7-9, Ps 62, Romans 12: 1-2, Matthew 16: 21-27

I spent a very happy hour last week being interviewed by a delightful middle-aged nurse about a medical research project. Our conversation covered a wide range of related subjects and finally got around to religion.

She had, she said, been trying to get people of different faiths and denominations to work together in the area of terminal care and been surprised how tricky that could be. For herself, she said, she wasn't specifically religious but, as a nurse, tried to follow the priorities of 'love'.

This, I granted, was entirely laudable but, without an underlying faith or philosophy, more complicated than it might seem at first glance. For example – a recent report to the United Nations by its 'rapporteur' on degrading treatment put denial of abortion at a moral equivalence with torture. For Mr. Juan Mendez and his fellow human rights experts, the loving thing to do is to kill more children.

As a nurse my interviewer would seek the best for her patients but would need a moral compass. In medicine, apart from childbirth, most work takes place against a background of debility and suffering. For a physician, the

work of healing or palliation always takes place at the crossroads of love and suffering. For a Christian the ultimate junction of love and suffering is the Cross of Jesus. No other explanation of the mystery of God and Man sees the final reconciliation in such intense and personal experience or offers a transforming key to the otherwise unanswerable question of suffering and mortality.

Earlier this year I was privileged to be back in Lourdes with HCPT. There, at the great Trust Mass in the underground basilica, Bishop Mark preached beautifully and poignantly on the intimate connection between suffering and love. The deeper we love, the deeper the suffering. The deeper the suffering, the greater the love. It is not an equation that the human heart either expects or desires or seeks but in the lives of quiet heroism of the sufferers and the lovers of Lourdes it is both unmistakable and a source of unquenchable joy. It is utterly counter-intuitive to human ambition. None of us look to suffer or look forward to its near inevitability at some point in our lives. But in Lourdes, for a few glorious days, we see the expectations of the world turned upside down and a little glimpse of what Heaven will bring in its final healing and transformation of Fallen Man by the suffering heart of love.

Today, in the Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples that the road ahead, the highway of salvation will lead through the Holy City, through rejection, cruelty, suffering and death. God can only redeem Man by entering fully into his humanity.

The Disciples are, understandably, at a loss to take this in. When they were called on the Galilee shoreline, or from under the fig tree or from the tax

collector's table, they came to follow the Messiah. They travelled the weary roads of mission and ministry for three long years in the expectation of triumph and transformation, of freedom and power. They did not give up everything to watch Jesus suffer and die as God's own loving sacrifice for the world. They did not leave home on the promise that they would be imprisoned and tortured, beheaded or crucified in a distant imperial capital. They did not foresee that their suffering and death would be glorious martyrdoms in the image of their Lord across the known world. They could not know that His sacrifice and theirs would be the unending love letter of God Himself to his struggling creatures.

Jesus tells them what they cannot yet comprehend and what, when the time comes, they will run away from. I suspect that it is little different for us on the road of discipleship. If it were possible we would take a more comfortable detour avoiding the Via Dolorosa and meeting up again at the lakeside barbeque. But the way of salvation always, always, always passes through the Calvary. The redemptive mystery of transformation by love and suffering hangs on the Cross of Jesus. The Cross is the place where the deepest depths of Man's sinfulness and cruelty is washed away in the flood tide of God's mercy in the blood of the sacrifice of His only Son. The Cross is the place where death takes on the Lord of Life and is vanquished. The Cross is the place where love and suffering meet and transform the destiny of Man.

We have two choices. To see unavoidable suffering as a pointless and destructive process or to offer it in solidarity with Christ for the salvation of the world. The former leads to bitterness, despair and defeat. The latter is

the path that led St. Peter to Vatican Hill, St. Paul to the executioner's block at Tre Fontane, St. Alban to the high place above Verulamium.

It is also the path taken by so many of those suffering that I have known hospitalised, housebound or in homes down my years of ministry. Nowhere will you find prayer more powerful, in solidarity with the suffering Love of the world, Jesus. It is the same redemptive joy, the foretaste of Heaven, that we experience in Lourdes where love and suffering meet in the arms of Our Lady at the foot of the Cross of Jesus. Proclaimed in the Gospel and hidden in full view of the world, it is the strange and darkling gateway to the Light of Lights, the secret pathway to the paradox of glory.

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