

SUFFERING AND HOPE

(J.F.M.H. - 3.5.2018)

Suffering and Sorrow are inevitable but the Cross is an object of hope. On it our Redemption had been achieved. It may not have been fully understood or appreciated at the time, for the days traumatic events of the crucifixion produced such great sorrow among some of those present and great feelings of guilt among others that it was not until Easter had been understood that the Cross could be more easily seen as a matter for hope. In the Encyclical '*SPE SALVI*' Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that 'redemption'—salvation—is not simply a given. Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present. The present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal'. At Calvary, God the Almighty Father, once again showed His infinite love for us, and this time most spectacularly by the sacrifice of His only Son. It is on Calvary when the Cross had done its work that we begin to see the great part in that sacrifice that the mystical Body of Christ allows us to share. God sends us suffering because He loves us: we accept suffering because we love Him. Love is the only answer that can be made to suffering. It is the only explanation of suffering save that of the Christian Scientist, who denies that suffering really exists. Either it has no real meaning or its meaning is love. One set of pagan philosophers with very noble ideals and with the desire of lifting human nature above itself, tried to make man impervious to suffering. It taught that suffering was stoically to be borne with, for everything that was disagreeable was virtuous. The Epicureans on the other hand, taught man to escape from suffering, saying it was degrading and debasing to him, since everything pleasurable was alone worthy of the name of virtue.

The Christian alone teaches that suffering is to be embraced. The idea is based upon the fatherhood of God and the story of the Incarnation: for it supposes that the Father only allows such suffering to come to each child as shall be for its own good. Naturally God could have prevented it altogether, but in His wise providence He has not done so; consequently we are driven to assert, as the ground claim of faith that it can only exist because Wisdom, Love and Power are one. We are really as children whom the world's toys have led astray, and who, when scratched are hurt in our play, run back for comfort to His arms. It is not, therefore, simply as a punishment that we should look upon suffering, for such a view of it will add more troubles than it can answer. Suffering is also the very expression of love, almost the only language that adequately describes its feelings. Love, then, which can only explain suffering, when it comes, can also alone give us the strength to accept it joyfully, for life is only tolerable when it is permeated with love.

There are hardships for everyone; do whatever we will, we can't escape them. Yet it is not the troubles of life, but the way we bear them, that makes life tolerable or not. To repine, complain cry out digs the point-head deeper into the flesh. It is the fretting against imprisonment that makes it the terrible torture that it is. The trouble is not that the walls are small but the mind is too big, and in it our desires, go out beyond the narrow borders of its cell. The anchorite was content in his tower, but the prisoner essayed day and night to escape, their condition was the same, but their hopes and desires were different. The whole secret then, of life, is to adapt our desires to our conditions. Love puts into bondage as many victims as hate; but those whom love's chains bind are glad of their lot. It is just so that our whole relation to God leads us to be tranquil in trouble, to be glad even in sufferings. We are told, that God punishes with suffering all workers of iniquity; but those also whom God loves; and for ourselves who try, fitfully indeed yet honestly, to love, we can be sure that it is only the strength of His embrace that we feel. Love then will help us understand life and its sorrows. As children in perfect trust and hope we must rely on Him that even our pain is from Him and will lead us to Him. Of course, the full realization of this is the attitude of the saints; for they seem to have achieved that same state of soul to which St. Paul confessed that he had reached, for which cause I take pleasure in my infirmities. (Eph.3)

The four Gospels present the story of the Crucifixion. From the sixth to the ninth hour there was darkness over the land, and at the ninth hour when the dying Christ cried out in a loud voice, *“Father into Thy hands I commend My Spirit”* and breathed His last, the Veil of the Temple was rent in two, the earth quaked, rocks were split, graves opened, and many bodies of the Saints rose from their tombs. The crowd, who had assembled to see the crucifixion, saw what had taken place, and returned home ‘beating their breasts’. The Roman Centurion, (with the soldiers), remained on duty. When the Centurion felt the earth trembling beneath his feet, and heard the dying Christ make that great cry to His Father, fear fell upon him, his eyes were opened, and he gave glory to God, *“Ay, truly this was a just man, this was indeed the Son of God.”* (Matt.27.54) His faith affected the frightened legionaries, and they echoed his words, *“Truly, this was the Son of God!”* That confession by heathen men contrasted with the behaviour of most of the Jews who seeing what had come to pass, showing guilt, had withdrawn. Soon there were left on Calvary, only the soldiers guarding the three bodies of the condemned men and those who loved Christ. Luke says, *“all His acquaintances and the women who had followed Him from Galilee stood at as distance and saw these things.”*(Lk. 22.49)

We know the names of some who stood by the cross: Mary His Mother, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee and John. Jesus had died about the ninth hour and His physical body, still hanging on the cross for several more hours could no longer feel pain. However, the suffering of Christ’s Mystical body was far from over. It was clearly present in these early members of it who were standing round the cross, and the suffering continues today. The love shown on Calvary by Christ and by these early members of His Mystical body was a two-way thing. Christ loved them and they returned that love; He suffered for them and they shared that suffering; He offered the suffering to His Father and they shared that offering just as we do at every Mass. The Priest says, ***‘Pray brethren that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father.’*** And we answer, ***“May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of His name, for our good, and the good of all His Church.”*** Christ the eternal Priest continues to offer His body in Sacrifice to His Almighty Father.

Pope Benedict’s Encyclical *“SPE SALVI facti sumus”* uses a saint called Josephine Bakhita (who was canonised by Pope John Paul II on 1st Oct 2000, and whose feast is on 8th February), to illustrate this reciprocal love, and the hope in God it generates. *“To come to know God—the true God—means to receive hope. We who have always lived with the Christian concept of God, and have grown accustomed to it, have almost ceased to notice that we possess the hope that ensues from a real encounter with this God. The example of a saint of our time can to some degree help us understand what it means to have a real encounter with this God for the first time. I am thinking of the African Josephine Bakhita. She was born around 1869 in Sudan. At the age of nine, slave-traders, beat her till she bled, and sold her five times in the slave-markets of Sudan. Eventually she found herself working as a slave for the mother and the wife of a general, and there she was flogged every day till she bled; as a result of this she bore 144 scars throughout her life. Finally, in 1882, she was bought by an Italian merchant for the Italian consul Callisto Legnani, who later returned to Italy. Here, after the terrifying “masters” who had owned her up to that point, Bakhita came to know a totally different kind of “master”—in Venetian dialect, which she was now learning, she used the name “Paron” for the living God, the God of Jesus Christ. Up to that time she had known only masters who despised and maltreated her, or at best considered her a useful slave. Now, however, she heard that there is a “Paron” above all masters, the Lord of all lords, and that this Lord is good, goodness in person. She came to know that this Lord even knew her, that he had created her—that he actually loved her. She too was loved, and by none other than the supreme “Paron”, before whom all other masters are themselves no more than lowly servants. She was known, loved, and she was awaited. What is more, this master had himself accepted the destiny of being flogged and now he was waiting for her “at the Father’s right hand”. Now she had “hope”*

—no longer simply the modest hope of finding masters who would be less cruel, but the great hope: “I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good.” Through the knowledge of this hope she was “redeemed”, no longer a slave, but a free child of God. She understood what Paul meant when he reminded the Ephesians that previously they were without hope and without God in the world—without hope because without God.

Hence, when she was about to be taken back to Sudan, Bakhita refused; she did not wish to be separated again from her “Paron”. On 9 January 1890, she was baptized and confirmed and received her first Holy Communion from the hands of the Patriarch of Venice. On 8 December 1896, in Verona, she took her vows in the Congregation of the Canossian Sisters and from that time onwards, besides her work in the sacristy and in the porter's lodge at the convent, she made several journeys round Italy in order to promote the missions: the liberation that she had received through her encounter with the God of Jesus Christ, she felt she had to extend it, it had to be handed on to others, to the greatest possible number of people. The hope born in her which had “redeemed” her she could not keep to herself; this hope had to reach everybody. “Most of our difficulties in life come about because we are so prone to lose heart. In our own lives we often meet this problem in our constant confessions of almost identical lists of sins. They seem to imply that it is useless to continue to make the effort at a ‘firm purpose of amendment.’ Our attempts at perfection seem useless.

It does not mean that we don't love God, but rather that we are somewhat lacking in hope. God knows we are sinners that we continually fail to keep to our promise not to sin again. It seems that for us trouble is certain. Now hope starts by acknowledging the certainty of these troubles. They imply that life is hard, that a perfect life (i.e. a life without fault) is impossible for us. We should realise we shall never overcome one single fault, at least in the sense that we shall never be able to find ourselves free from the temptations. One may improve, and please God we shall. We may lessen the number of our sins by narrowing the occasions of them. We may so far clear ourselves that the old fault has ceased to be repeated, for the goodness of God can achieve all these things. But at any rate we must never expect that this will be done for us so completely as to prevent forever any struggle in our lives. We can never be perfect, but each of us remains “an unprofitable servant”.

However, though we can never be perfect; God does not expect perfection from us, for He knows He would not get it. He knows all mankind, for He made us. He knows exactly the limits of our power. Only the Heavenly Father is or can be perfect. It is foolish of us then to be discouraged because our prayers are full of distractions, our confessions betray our constant failures. Rather it should fill us with wonder if for any length of time these things went wholly well, we should only grow suspicious. He knows our weaknesses too well. But what He does ask is that we should try to overcome them, that and nothing more, that we should try day after day, despite failures, repeated and certain, to overcome these obstacles to our union with Him. It seems that goodness consists not only in the love of God, but in the attempts to love Him. St. Catherine of Siena put this rather well, “*God does not ask a perfect work, but infinite desire.*” Our confidence and hope has to be in God's strength, let us go on striving our best, for our business in life is really little else than to continue to fail without losing courage or lessening effort. Living in the way described by St. Josephine Bakhita, “*I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good,*” will surely lead us to echo at the time of our death the dying words of Christ, “**Father into Thy hands I commend My Spirit**”.