

March 2011

GOOD FRIDAY'S CHILD

There is something about Good Friday that I cannot get used to. It always comes into our lives so strangely new. It is more than the quietness of our town or of the stillness of the fields that stretch out towards the mountains. It is as if creation itself participates in some kind of turning of the light – a light that touches the heart of each person and even of the cosmos itself. There was a brooding presence about the tradition of Tenebrae which many of you will remember. To be a part of that ominous moment, to capture some of that universal mystery requires our stillness, our openness and a surrender that is rare enough.

I remember a recent Good Friday afternoon watching our parishioners remove their shoes and file slowly towards our hand-held cross at the altar. One by one, young and old, they reverently pressed their lips, in a strange gesture of intimacy, against the cold comfort of this bronze symbol of pain. I was moved anew at the mystery happening before me. I was so surprised, yet again, at the depth of a faith that could perennially draw people into such a rich and profound ritual. How could they embrace this symbol of death? How could they kiss the very source of the death of a God made human? And in doing so, how could they meet, greet and welcome all the destructive elements in their own lives?

On this dark day, how amazing it was, how full of terror and beauty, of graced insight, that we publicly and deliberately, mostly blindly but yet hopefully, knelt down in adoration before the gaping wounds of love that destroyed the One who saved us, and that are still kept open and bleeding by our infidelity and our sins?

As I watched the shuffling queue, something inside of me lurched. For one reason or another, in my heightened state of awareness, I could identify the trials and traumas of so many of our community, as they humbly waited their turn to kiss the cross. I noticed a man who had told me he'd lost his faith. (And then I remembered a bishop I met in the USA in 1999. He told me about the daily agonies he endured while going through the motions of ministering to his flock, knowing that, in his heart, he believed in nothing anymore.) I prayed for them both.

The queue continued. A man in a wheelchair; a woman with crutches. I partly envied them. Their crosses were visible; mine were invisible. The source of their pain was, in a sense, outside them; mine was within. So I prayed for all those who were disabled inside, like me. There they were, shuffling along in silent sorrow. I knew so many of their stories – a couple whose children had gone astray and the self-blame they heaped upon themselves, a husband who could not forgive his wife's infidelity, neither could they regain any harmony together, and so, for them, the days and nights of living hell burning in an ordinary house in an ordinary street.

Inappropriately perhaps, I continued to drift from my presider's role into my own inner world. I realised, a little deeper than I already had, that, one way or another, we are all spiritually and emotionally crippled. At some level and at certain times we are all, as the poet says, living lives of quiet desperation. I wept inwardly for the world of pain, but I wept, too, for myself. Is it possible, I wondered, as a priest, to be the most religious person in the parish and yet, to be the least spiritual? Nobody is more susceptible to be trapped into the trappings of religion than the priest himself.

It was at this point that I wanted to throw off the weight of the vestments I was wearing and reveal my raw and trembling spirit. These days, most priests will confess to feeling the icy grip of fear around their hearts. Many of us inwardly rage against the way we are currently perceived and treated by those we serve. "Ecce homo", I wanted to shout. "I'm not a clerical machine, a clone of the institution; I am, like Jesus, a man, a human being, with needs and cravings and desires to express myself and to be free." What else, I wondered, is today's ritual of shadow and death about, if it does not touch the deepest part of my own sinful, fragile and beautiful soul?

It was then I noticed a young mother with her small child waiting in the queue. She knelt down and kissed the cross. She then lifted her baby so that her tiny mouth would meet the hard nail sticking out from

the feet of the cold, dead Jesus. My heart contracted. Why? I'm not sure. I think I saw, in an instant, the future life of this small baby. In some unusual way I felt the inevitable pain that lay ahead in the destiny of this child. And then the pathos, the heart-wrenching pathos of that tiny kiss, when, all unknowing (or maybe not!), with a fierce wisdom that defies the sophisticated doctrines of a thousand religions, this fragile little creature instinctively embraced the dark shadows that would, somehow, one day, break her and make her, hurt her and heal her, and then, as Jesus promised, guide her way to heaven.

Was this her first 'yes', I wondered, to the inevitable paradox of being in love with God, to the necessity of pain for new life to happen, to the mystery of the womb and the tomb that she had participated in, a year or two earlier, at the moment of her birth and baptism? In some mysterious way that we will never understand, maybe some instinct in her wise wee heart already knew that 'if you dare to love, you must be prepared to grieve'.

It was now time to prepare the altar for Holy Communion. Many thoughts around this afternoon's ritual came into my head as we processed to the sacristy for the ciborium. Teilhard de Chardin said that if we could but gather together, in one instant, all the suffering of our lives, the explosion of love would transform the whole world. The mystics hold that our love-filled pain is the fuel for the journey towards enlightenment. The Buddhists advise us to use suffering to end suffering. The Jewish Zohar tells us that the gates of the Holy Palace open only to human tears.

As I climb the altar-steps it occurs to me that it isn't really the cross that we kiss; it is the love that shaped it. It is not by the suffering of Jesus that we are redeemed. We are saved by his love, not his cross. What we are really kissing is the living, loving flesh of a passionate and beautiful man, not the bleeding wounds so callously inflicted on him by his thoughtless persecutors.

Shocking brutality can never save us. Only love redeems. And the focus of redemption today is the bloody body of Christ that we call our breath-taking, broken world. Why do I suspect that in some mysterious way, the little child I noticed last Good Friday, carried the whole truth of Christ's passion in her brief and fragile life? So great a wisdom in so small a kiss.