

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 7th May 'The Tenderness of Jesus'

The experience of Easter softens our hearts. It helps us understand Pope Francis' intense desire that we become 'people of mercy'. The traumatic events of Holy Week reveal the unambiguous compassion of the human heart of Jesus. In the life of Jesus. He was so good at simply walking with people without judging them, liberating people without making them dependent, forgiving people unconditionally while saving their embarrassment. He set out only to bless people with their own divine power.

Above all the delight of Jesus was, as Emily Dickinson put it, 'to dwell in the potential of human beings'. This is what he was doing on the road to Emmaus. He was clarifying for his faithful friends what they already half new. He didn't berate them for their slowness. Because he loved them he was prepared to wait for the heart to understand. Like all true teachers, he could recognise the butterfly in a caterpillar, the eagle in an egg and the saint in the sinful human being. And, as the sun coaxes open the petals of the daisy on a Spring morning, so too, the love of Jesus reached into the uncertain hearts of those who found themselves drawn to him.

There is a story about a flower which blooms only in the dark. Not only is this unexpected moment unseen; the aroma, too, is seemingly wasted in the night air. The light of God in our hearts is something similar - shining within our darkest night and our greatest sins. Not many are aware of this extraordinary, paradoxical epiphany. It was the way of Jesus to notice, and remember, this undeniable truth and, instead of condemning and judging, his gentleness touched every heart that lay open to him.

Knowing his own temptations and emotions, he understood those of others. Familiar, through contemplation, with the labyrinth of contradictions in its own soul, he saw accurately into the mysteries of the human heart. And, in the same manner, without enough silence and surrender in our own deepest selves, we, his followers, will continue to alienate people by too much blame and too little trust.

What the Churches need to recover is the tenderness of Jesus. This only comes, as the poet Roethke said, 'from long looking'. We do well to reflect on how a mother entices out, the humanity and the personality of her baby. Hans Urs von Balthasar, theologian of beauty, wrote: 'After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back. She has awakened love in its heart and, awakening love in its heart, she awakens also recognition'. And Rainer Maria Rilke says that an infant's journey to human awareness depends on the beckoning, beguiling voice of the mother, easing the child into selfhood, lessening the shadows of the abyss that traps us in inarticulate darkness.

Gathering all the richness of this imagery of the growth of the small soul as created, fleshed and enticed into its fullness by a loving mother, Ronald Rolheiser, in his inimitable sensitivity, writes, 'All preaching, teaching, theology and pastoral practice is really a function of letting God's voice become the beckoning, caressing, cajoling voice of the mother, calling us out of fear, darkness, chaos, and muted frustration to freedom, thought, self-expression and the awareness of love.'

In his *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis writes in praise of the domestic 'mother-tongue'. He grieves the hard words of the institutional church. As heralds of the Gospel, lay and clerical, he urges, we need to recover that mother tongue, that coaxing, patient and captivating presence with which our own mothers, and, before that, Jesus, allured us into the awareness of our own amazing mystery. When there is fear and darkness all around we can feel small and powerless. In our heart of hearts, when we are alone at night, when we put down the masks, the front, the brave smile, what we long for is not the hard language of Church-speak; we yearn for the smile, the loving eyes and open arms of our mother. As anyone who is even vaguely familiar with the emotions of those who feel neglected in residential homes, and frightened in the ICUs of our hospitals know, what we all want at the end of the day is to be welcomed home.

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