

Good Friday: On the Mystery of the Cross and of Human Suffering

One of the greatest mysteries of human life is the mystery of human suffering. And for us Christians there is no time of the year when this mystery impinges upon our collective consciousness more forcibly than today's commemoration of the Good Friday, of Jesus' passion and death on the cross.



This suffering and dying, the suffering

crucified on it for three excruciating hours, and of finally dying on the cross in the midst of the jeers of the crowd and of the seeming “abandonment” of the Father makes us wonder why the Son of God had to suffer that much for our salvation and whether all of us were worth that pain and suffering at all.

The question as to why Jesus suffered has spawned more questions in history; this time, though, the questions are about ourselves, about the humanity that has gone through so much suffering and continues to experience suffering: Why is there suffering? Why do we suffer? Why do the good and the innocent suffer? Where does suffering come from? If God is good and loving, why does he allow us to suffer? (The existence of so much pain and suffering in the world is one of the reasons why many people do not believe in God, arguing that if God exists at all, he must be an apathetic and insensitive God, a God who does not care for us, for his creatures.)

Fr. Catalino G. Arevalo, SJ, in a talk given so many years ago on the cross of Christ and on human suffering, said that in our collective quest to find answers to these questions, human beings have gone to philosophy and to literature but have discovered no answers there. And so we have turned to theology, to the bible, and there we find the answer. Yet, the answer that we discover in the Scriptures is not for the curious and the philosophical mind, for the answer that the bible provides us is not kind of answer that the human mind expects. While it is true that Jesus talks about the cross, about his suffering, he does not offer us a systematic theology of the cross, of human suffering, in the gospels. However, we find something new, something beautiful, in the gospels: Jesus' attitude towards the cross, towards his own suffering, that teaches us about the meaning of the cross and the value of human suffering, thereby giving new meaning and significance to our daily crosses and sufferings in life.

In the bible, God does not answer our question about the meaning of human suffering directly, to our mind's deepest satisfaction. For in response to humankind's deepest question as to why we suffer and as to why there is suffering in the world, God's answer is his Son placarded—suffering and dying—on the cross. God's response to the deepest question of the human on the meaning and value of human suffering is the silence of the cross. To our deepest question as to why we suffer, God's answer is his

Son hanging on the cross. The cross is God's answer to our deepest question about the meaning of human suffering. Only at the foot of the cross can we have a glimpse of God's answer to our question; only on Good Friday can we discover, discover anew, re-discover God's answer to our deepest question about the meaning of human suffering.

On Good Friday, God speaks to us, to humanity: "You have been asking me about why there is suffering in the world and about the meaning and value of human suffering, of your own crosses and sufferings in life, I have no answer except my Son hanging on the cross." Paul Claudel, a French thinker, once said: "God came in Jesus not to take away our pain. God came in Jesus not even to explain it. God came in Jesus simply to feel our pain, and to feel it with his presence." In the midst of our pain and suffering and the question that they engender, God's answer is Christ himself, his only Son, among us in our pain and suffering.

In filial obedience to his Father and for his great love of a sinful humanity, Jesus, the Son of God, takes up pain and suffering upon himself. He embraces suffering, he embraces the cross and dies hanging upon it. We ask why we suffer and in response to our question God embraces suffering himself. In the gospels, Jesus tells us that if we want to become his disciples, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. Where? To Calvary. Jesus does not evade sufferings, and he is not asking his disciples to avoid sufferings in their life.

How often have we been told that the greatest way out of suffering, the best way to understand suffering, is to go through it, to embrace it when it comes, without looking for it. Why is this so? Why can we not learn the difficult lessons in life and be wise and strong through the good times of life? Perhaps, it is because God has made it this way, for there are some lessons in life, normally the hardest and most important ones to learn, that, for some mysterious reasons, we learn only through suffering, that we get to and are forced to learn only in the experience of suffering. Aeschylus, a Greek tragedian who lived in the 6th-5th century BC, observed that the Greek gods prescribed a solemn decree that from suffering alone comes wisdom, that in the experience of suffering alone can wisdom be attained. Someone told me that had he not gone through an experience of a very debilitating disease, he would not have learned the difficult lessons in life, lessons that are important for his eternal salvation.

There is indeed something "redemptive" in pain and in suffering. When we look at it from the point of view of even the most ordinary human experiences we know that this is true. Children who are inoculated from pain and hardships since birth never grow at all. They are those who are not allowed by their parents to play under the rain for fear that they may catch fever or cold, or are not permitted to crawl on the grass without first being liberally applied mosquito repellent on their skin for fear that they may get bitten by mosquitoes, or who are not allowed to run around without being tailed by their nannies for fear that they may stumble, or who for a little scratch on their knees in case they tumble or slip are immediately brought to a doctor or are profusely washed with rubbing alcohol. When they go to school, they are not allowed to take a jeep or a bus so that even when they are already grown up they still do not know how to cross a pedestrian lane by themselves. When a little adversity or disappointment in life comes, they feel as though the whole world were crumbling down on them. For the first experience of unrequited love, they hurt themselves, or even commit suicide. Indeed, they never grow, or if they grow at all, they grow weak because they grow boneless and spineless, with nothing to hold their immature and inexperienced life together. On the other hand, those who go through life with so much pain, suffering and tribulation are normally the ones who grow strong and

wise, for they are forged in the crucible of life.

Salvador Agualada, cmf