Compelled by the Cross

Homily for Palm Sunday 2021

The reading we heard from Philippians 2 succinctly expresses the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here St. Paul describes for us the self-emptying of Jesus as he comes into the world. There is a very close parallel with the Mysteries of the Rosary and this text. When St. Paul says that Jesus emptied himself, the Joyful and Luminous Mysteries are brought to mind, as we remember the nature of the incarnation that involved the cooperation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and all those who had a part to play in God with us Emmanuel. When thinking of his becoming obedient even unto death on the Cross, the Sorrowful Mysteries are brought to mind as we remember all those who colluded in the Lord's passion and death. When the Apostle then declares that God then highly exalted him, the Glorious Mysteries are brought to mind as we remember that with Jesus the last enemy death has been defeated and Jesus is indeed Lord.

As we begin this Holy Week, the Church invites us to consider in greater detail the Sorrowful Mysteries. For today, and again on Friday we hear two of the Passion Readings, St. Mark and St. John. By entering into the Lord's Passion we are invited to have this same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

The Church teaches that the Passion of Jesus is the story that helps us to make sense of our own stories, most especially our suffering. One of the understandings so clearly articulated in Catholic Theology is the teaching on redemptive suffering. Redemptive suffering is most fully realized in the Passion of Jesus.

So how does redemptive suffering work? Well, it is not tantamount to being a doormat in the presence of evil or just allowing oneself to be walked on. It always involves a clear naming of the violence or injustice or disorder. It entails speaking the truth publicly and unambiguously. And then it is being willing to suffer the effects of the injustice or violence, or whatever your suffering might be.

- Grief
- Illness – even terminal
- Disability
- Depression, anxiety
- Unemployment
- Familial conflict
- Loneliness
- Preternatural demonic affliction
- Peer pressure and bullying
- Adult children having rejected the Catholic faith
- Allow people to think of their suffering

Now here is the thing. Suffering without Jesus is meaningless. Suffering with Jesus is transformative and redemptive.

This was the case for Simon of Cyrene. Mark is the only Gospel writer who in his passion account mentions Simon's sons by name. We read in Mark 15:21:

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus[1]

Did you hear that? Simon didn't ask to share is the suffering of Jesus – he was compelled to. How did this suffering affect him and change him? Did it transform him? I think it did. It made him a follower of Jesus so that his sons, who, many years later living in Rome were part of the Church there. How do we know this? Well, because Mark the writer of this Gospel, wrote to the Christians in Rome, during the time of Nero's persecution in the 60s of the first century. St. Paul in his letter to the Romans writes this:

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.[2]

Now Alexander isn't mentioned by name in St. Paul's greeting because it is believed he had died. But Rufus is mentioned and his mother – that is, Simon of Cyrene's wife, who was like a mother to St. Paul.

So consider this. Simon was just passing by when he was forced to carry the cross – Suffering is so often like that. We were just passing by and we are compelled to pick it up. But when we give our yes to Jesus and share in His cross, like Simon it can change us and deepen our love for Jesus and desire to follow him.

In his book on the Holy Week Narrative Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said the following about redemptive suffering as it pertains to the Passion of Jesus.

In Jesus' Passion, all the filth of the world touches the infinitely pure one, the soul of Jesus Christ and, hence, the Son of God himself. Because infinite good is now at hand in the man Jesus, the counterweight to all wickedness is present and active within world history, and the good is always infinitely greater than the vast mass of evil, however terrible it may be.

This is what the Cross teaches and declares to us. Jesus didn't come to take away suffering but to transform it.

The story is told of a priest who traveled with a group of priests on a pilgrimage to Rome where they had a chance to meet Pope St. John Paul II. They knew they'd only have a short meeting with him and wondered at the words of wisdom he would tell them. One of the priests hurt his leg and had to do most of the pilgrimage limping, with a cast on his foot and crutches. After their journey and finally at the moment when they'd meet the Pope they approached him one at a time.

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[1] _The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition_. (1993). (Mk 15:21). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

[2] _The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition_. (1993). (Ro 16:13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

When the injured priest had his turn, St John Paul II saw his leg, pulled him in close and whispered in his ear, "Don't waste your suffering!" And with that, the visit was done.

This is what Holy Week invites us to hear again. Suffering is a given in this world. But let us not waste, it so that like Simon of Cyrene our sharing in the Cross will not be lost on us. The Christian's motto is the Cross. You will recognize God's love by this sign, by the sufferings He sends you. May we learn to respond to this love so that with St. Theresa of Kolkata we can discover:

> *"Pain and suffering have come into your life, but remember pain, sorrow, suffering are but the kiss of Jesus — a sign that you have come so close to Him that He can kiss you."*

Simon of Cyrene was compelled to come so close to the Cross and therefore to Jesus' redemptive suffering that it transformed him. May it be so for you, may if be so for me.