

A Spirituality of Suffering and healing

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I have been asked to talk about a spirituality of suffering and healing. I confess that I would have been very hesitant to choose this subject myself. There are all sorts of sufferings: mental and physical, the suffering of loneliness and of war, the suffering of illness and anguish. What they have in common is a loss of meaning, a feeling of one's world coming apart and nothing having any sense. Pain is the acute discomfort but suffering is how that often results in an anguished loss of meaning.

If that is how you are feeling, you do not want someone turning up and making easy sense of it. You might want to shout: But you don't understand! You are not taking me seriously. Here am I living through this disorientation, when my world is falling to bits, and you explain it all away with some neat theory! That is a denial of what I am living! And so when one is with someone enduring a deep suffering, perhaps because they have lost someone whom they love or because they are terminally ill, the last thing that you want to offer is simple spirituality suffering. Understandably they may get very angry.

What then can we offer to those who suffer? Obviously, the first thing is to be with them. When the Son of Man divides the sheep from the goats at the Last Judgement, in Matthew 25, they are blessed because they fed the hungry, gave the thirsty something to drink and clothed the naked. They did something for them. But what they offered the sick and the prisoners is to be with them: 'I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.'

Suffering often isolates people. They are trapped in a prison of pain. We must be with them, even if we have no idea in advance what to say. If there is anything to say, then we shall discover it with them. As Jesus says of the moment of great suffering, 'Do not be anxious before what you are to say, but say what is given to you in that hour, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit.' (Mark 13.11)

I expect that many of you have seen that wonderful film, *Des homes et des dieux*, 'Of Gods and men', in English. It is the true story of a community of Trappist monks who are deeply embedded in a Muslim village. They love and they are loved. Then they are caught in the middle of the violent war between the army and Islamicist terrorists. The film plots their decision to stay. They cannot leave the villagers alone in this moment of suffering. They must simply be with them. The monks were taken into the woods and beheaded on May 21st 1996.

I went there a few weeks later to visit our brother Pierre Claverie, the bishop of Oran. He too had received death threats and his priests had begged him to escape. He said:

Throughout the dramatic events in Algeria, I have often been asked, "What are you doing there? Why do you stay? Shake off the dust from your sandals! Come back home!" Home...Where are we at home? ... We have no power, but are there as at the bedside of a friend, of a sick brother, silently holding his hand and wiping his brow. We are there for the sake of Jesus, because he is the one suffering there amid violence that spares no one, crucified again and again in the flesh of thousands of innocents. Like his mother Mary and Saint John, we are there at the foot of the cross where

Jesus died abandoned by his followers and bitterly mocked by the crowd.¹ On the cross Jesus speaks; his enemies speak, but Mary and the beloved disciples are simply there.

Forty years ago I had operations on both of my ears. For a few weeks I could hear nothing at all. In fact I feared that I would never hear again. My brethren were wonderful and came and sat by my bed every day. It was terribly distressing to be with them and unable to communicate, but it would have been worse alone. I now give thanks to this experience because it helped me to understand the loneliness of suffering.

St Martin de Porres was sixteenth century Dominican lay brother in Lima. He drove his Prior crazy by bringing the sick into the priory. You could not walk around without falling over them. The Prior tried to stop him, but one day he found that Martin had put a leper in his bed. When the Prior said, 'But you have disobeyed me', Martin replied that compassion was more important than obedience, and he *still* got canonised.

Our presence to the sick is a sign that they are not alone. God is with them. Meister Eckhart said: 'Even if you cannot conceive of yourself as near to God, you should still regard God as near to you.'² For God is utterly and intimately present to us, closer to me than I am to myself, as St Augustine said. We are a sign that God forgets no one. 'Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion of the son of her womb? Even these may forget yet I will not forget you. Behold I have graven you on the palms of my hand.' (Isaiah 49.15)

But we have to say something! I had just landed in Jerusalem, in 1993, when I received a phone call from Rome to say that my father was dying. I got back as soon as I could, three days before his death. On that last day, somehow we managed to get all of his six children around the bedside. He could no longer speak, and we needed prayers. All that I had was my breviary, and so we read the psalms, passing them from hand to hand. They are perfect examples of prayers for the suffering.

The psalms are filled with suffering and anger. The most common form of psalm is the lament, in which the singers shout out their anguish, their disorientation and pain. When Mark and Matthew describe Jesus' death on the cross, they put the words of Psalm 22 in his mouth: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night and find no rest.' The psalms give voice to his raw anguish.

The psalms do anger really well. When we are suffering, then we may well feel angry with God. If you have lost your child, then of course you will feel a rage. How dare God let this happen? And the Church does not say, like David Cameron to an MP, 'There, there, my dear, do not get upset.' It says, 'Let your anger rip. And we have the very best words to help you to do so'. When we are furious with God, turning on the spit of the pain, we may feel deserted and let down. Why have you forsaken me? The words of the psalm express that rage and legitimatise it. Walter Brueggemann says that the psalms give form to the formlessness of grief³.

¹ Jean-Jacques Perennes OP *A Life Poured Out: Pierre Claverie of Algeria* New York 2007 p.243f

² *Talks of Instruction no 17* Quoted by Richard Woods *Meister Eckhart* p.163

³ 'The Formfulness of Grief' *Interpretation* vo. 31 1977 p.265

And because these emotions are given words, words of the community, then in singing them you are no longer alone. Your distress is recognised and named. The silence is broken. Around the bed of my dying father, the Church gave us no explanation, no theory, but ancient songs and poems, two and a half thousand years old. When we recited them, we became part of a vast community, stretching through the centuries and across the globe. By giving communal expression to the loss of meaning, we found a certain meaning.

These psalms are songs to be sung. When I arrived at my father's bed the first evening, he could still talk. And I asked him whether there was anything that I could do. He asked me to find his Walkman so that he could listen to music. He wanted me to bring Hayden's *Seven Last Words on the Cross*, and Mozart's *Requiem*. This music does not explain anything! It gives creative expression to our suffering. Faced with the confusion of pain, music gives it shape and hints at hope. In the face of suffering and death, we are offered songs, poems and music. The only way to meet what is destructive is with creativity, which is a tiny share in the creativity of the one who made the heaven and the earth and who raised Jesus from the dead?

One of the gifts of those who suffer may be to find words for us all. The words that they find in their solitude create a community among the suffering, who can say: Yes, that's me. Gerard Manley Hopkins was an English Jesuit who did not always enjoy his time in Ireland quite as much as I do. He went through a dark time, of almost despair and terrible solitude, but his poems are a gift for all who are in the dark. When they hear them, they are less alone.

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep⁴.

For young people today, popular music is of vast importance in articulating their sense of hope and joy and also sometimes their sorrow and distress. In trains, on the underground, walking in the street, you see young people wandering with headphones, listening to music that gives voice to their distress.

Surely, if we are to attend to them with compassion, then we must value that music, open our ears to it, and catch its nuances. Often their earphones seem to deepen their isolation. But we must give thanks to the composers and singers who offer our young water in the desert. Surely we must be open to the creativity of popular music and accept its gifts.

So, we must be with those who suffer, we must give voice to their suffering. But the psalms suggest a third step. They are filled with anger and pain, but, with one exception, they always carry you on towards praise. You are never left stuck in the bog of despair. Your pain is recognised, and then you are swept on to praise. We have seen how Psalm 22 begins in desolation. But, without any explanation, the tone suddenly shifts: 'I will tell of your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.' Every psalm, except 88, ends in praise. The singer gets caught in the movement of the song and carried out of the suffering and into joy, like a wave that carries the surfer onto the safety of the beach. This is the structure of the whole Psalter, which ends with

⁴ *Poems and Prose* Selected and introduced by W. H. Gardner London 1953 p. 61

exuberant psalms of praise. If you can speak your anger and distress, then maybe you are ready to be caught in the movement beyond it. Every psalm has a sort of dynamism, to which you can surrender.

At some stage, probably after the Exile, most of the psalms were ascribed to David. He was to Song as Moses was to the Law. This was not just because he was a harpist and was supposed to have composed so many psalms. It was because he lived a life which included just about anything that could happen to a human being. Success and failure, love and adultery, glory and humiliation, sin and sanctity, until he reached the peace of his ripe old age. Whatever happened, you could find yourself in his life: crying out your pain, asking forgiveness, filled with joy. When Israelites could make no sense of their lives, and everything was collapsing, then they could find themselves in the Songs of David. In the New Testament, the singer becomes Jesus. This son of David becomes the one of whose life the psalms speak.

Isak Dinesen said: 'All sorrows can be borne if you put them ...tell a story about them.'⁵ When you are suffering, then it is easy to lose the plot. Your life comes to bits and you have no future. There is only the senseless present of the pain and that is why it can be hard to look beyond the suffering. You are in the night, and in the night time seems to stop.

As Christians, we are offered a story in which we discover hope. We are inside the story of Jesus, of whom the psalms spoke. Sometimes it may be Christmas, at other times it is Lent. For those who suffer it is often a long Good Friday. But we are inside a story which will carry us forward to the dawn of Easter Sunday and beyond. This is our story because we are the body of Christ. The pain is not explained away, but you may be able to live with it, because you are sharing Christ's life, and we know that for him the dawn did rise.

My father longed to retire so that he could devote his life to his family, to gardening and to sport. But when the moment arrived, he was deeply unhappy. He became very silent, and we had no idea what to do. One Easter Monday, he came to meet me from a bus, and I could see from a distance that something had changed. He walked with a lighter step. And he said to me immediately: 'I have lived Holy Week.' Christianity is a drama. It breaks the tyranny of the present moment. However bad it is, the story eventually opens the way forward.

Once again it is great art that might help this to happen. Grünewald painted the most dramatic representation of the cross ever, the Isenheim Altarpiece. It shows us a tortured Christ. He painted for the dormitory of people suffering from St Anthony's fire, a terrible disease which turned the skin red and itchy, and then black and gangrenous, until the limbs literally fell off the body. The body of Christ on the cross appears to be suffering from this disease. Christ is sharing their illness and they are sharing his. They are in his story and he is in theirs.

When my community in Oxford became involved in ministry for people with Aids, we commissioned an icon of Christ with Aids. Actually, it ended up showing someone with Aids resting in the arms of

⁵ Quoted Raymund Gaita *A common Humanity: Thinkinbg about love and truth and justice* London and New York 20021 p.98

Jesus. We wanted to help people with Aids discover themselves in Christ. His suffering is ours and ours is his, and so we too are being gently borne beyond the tyranny of the present towards Easter.

So stories break the tyranny of the present, when the future without suffering seems unimaginable. There is a famous rabbinic story of King Solomon asking for a ring for the feast of Sukkot. Finally one is found and all that it has written on it are three Hebrew characters, meaning 'This too shall pass.' In his case, it was his glory, for the sufferer it is the pain. It has inspired lots of poems. Let me just quote one by Grace Noll Crowell:

This, too, will pass. O heart, say it over and over,
Out of your deepest sorrow, out of your deepest grief,
No hurt can last forever - perhaps tomorrow
Will bring relief.

This, too, will pass. It will spend itself - its fury
Will die as the wind dies down with the setting sun
Assuaged and calm, you will rest again, forgetting
A thing that is done.

Repeat it again and again, O heart for your comfort
This, too, will pass as surely as passed before
The old forgotten pain, and the other sorrows
That once you bore.

As certain as stars at night, or dawn after darkness
Inherent as the lift of the blowing grass
Whatever your despair or your frustration --
This, too, will pass.

If the story breaks the tyranny of suffering, then maybe we can rest with it, even learn to be at ease with it. Thanks be to God, we relieve a vast amount of pain. I no longer need to be afraid when I go to the dentist. But our society has come to panic faced with pain and we feel that we have a human right to a pill that will get rid of it. We fight against pain with the weapons of the pharmaceutical industry. Our faith offers a way to live with pain and transmute into something fruitful. Don't get me wrong. If I am in pain, I rush immediately for the Ibuprofen! Give me my pill! But I also know that sometimes we must face pain more positively. Facing pain spiritually can transmute barren suffering into fertile joy.

I had a good friend called Ursula Fleming. Whenever I went to lunch her vast Alsatian dog, Attila. She would invariably grill lamb cutlets, Ursula not the dog, but become so absorbed in conversation that she always burnt them, and Attila always ended up eating them while we had bread and cheese. No wonder Attila loved me so much. Ursula worked in the Royal Free Hospital, helping people suffering from cancer to live with their pain. She claimed that she had learned everything from Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth century Dominican. In fact she founded the Eckhart Society. Pain is not to be endured with gritted teeth. That only makes the body tense and so we suffer more. It is to be lived with, accepted, and then immediately it lessens.

She wrote: 'Unless they ask me I don't tell my patients about God. I teach them to accept, to relax, to concentrate, to focus their attention of the pain and to let go into it rather than using effort and

will-power to fight against it. The moment they do this the pain, both of mind and body, is eased. But if they understand for themselves that what they are accepting is the “will of God” then, what they learn about control of pain and suffering is a revelation for the rest of their lives⁶. I am nervous of talking about telling people to accept pain as ‘the will of God.’ It sounds as if God might send us terrible suffering so as to do good to us, which sounds odd and cruel. Rather I would say that we can learn to be at ease in the suffering, not struggling against it as an enemy, because God is there.

Eckhart says, ‘Whatever a good person suffers for God’s sake, he suffers in God, and God is with him in his suffering. If my suffering is in God and God suffers with me, how then can my suffering be painful when suffering loses its pain, and my pain is in God and my pain *is* God?’⁷

So, I have argued, a spirituality of suffering and healing does not explain the pain. It does not give us easy words to say. First, then, we are to be present and ask that the Lord give us the right words to so, if any. The psalms give us wonderful words to articulate our anger and distress. Maybe the Church needs to be more attentive to words of popular songs. If they make sense to our young, then let’s open our ears. Perhaps most beautifully, we offer a story that carries us beyond the pain, for that too will pass.

A final word on the gifts we can receive from the suffering. When I was a student, I was befriended by an old French Dominican. He had had a difficult life, and bore many wounds. He wrote a novel called, *Les Cicatrices*, the scars. And when he gave me a copy, he wrote that I must always remember that our scars can become the doors of the sun. (*Les cicatrices peuvent devenir les portes du soleil*). We all have wounds, mental and physical. But they can become the doors of the sun. We need the sick for the light that they shed.

One of my American brethren, Ed Ruane, went to visit his brother, who has a nine year old daughter who is profoundly deaf. She went over to Ed and started signing to him, and Ed could understand nothing. So her father called her over and he said, ‘You can hear with your eyes and speak with your hands. But your uncle Ed cannot. He can only speak with his mouth and hear with his ears.’ And so she went over and said to Ed, ‘Uncle, I am so sorry for you, that you cannot hear with your eyes and speak with your hands, just as I cannot hear with my ears.’ She knew that she had a great complementary gift.

In the West, we have cultivated an odd and unhelpful image of what it is to be human. Western individualism suggests that the real human being is the solitary hero. Often this is conceived of as the macho male. He depends upon no one. He is self-sufficient. He is the Lone Ranger, the hero of a thousand cowboy films. But this image of what it is to be human is a dangerous illusion. Human beings thrive by giving and receiving gifts from each other. We depend up each other. God says to St Catherine of Siena: ‘I could well have supplied each of you with all your needs, both spiritual and material. But I wanted to make you dependent on one another so that each of you would be my minister, dispensing the graces and gifts you have received from me.’⁸

⁶ Meister Eckhart: *The Man from Whom God hid Nothing*. Leominster 1995 p.53

⁷ Quoted Richard Woods *Meister Eckhart* p.174

⁸ Trans Suzanne Noffke OP *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* New York, Mahwah 1980 ch. 7 p. 38

Many suffering people need help. This may be a painful humiliation. And yet it may be an invitation to us all to be freed from the monstrous illusion that anyone of us is self-sufficient. It is part of the beauty of being human, that I need others to be myself. People with disabilities, who need help to get up in the morning or wash or shop, remind me that I too need others if I am to be truly human. Let me give you the example of my brother Vincent, who died a year ago.

Vincent was blind from birth. He never saw another human face. He entered the Order when he was young and soon became one of the most beloved members of the Province. This is partly because he was a deeply lovable person, who was strong, humorous and has utterly no self-pity. He was very independent, in the best sense! Once when he was walking around Liverpool with his white cane, he came to a busy road, and he asked someone if they could cross together. And so they crossed the road, he heard the screeching of traffic and the sounding of horns. When he got to the other side he said, 'Thank you so much for escorting me over.' And the other person, 'No, you escorted me. I'm blind!' 'No, I'm blind!'

When I was Provincial, every community always asked if I would assign Vincent to their community. Not only was it because he is lovable. Vincent gathered community around him. You cannot have someone in the community who is totally blind unless you really are a community. You have to ensure that nothing is in his way when he feels his way down the corridors, that the milk in the fridge is always in exactly the same place, so that he can find it. All our decisions about our common life have to bear Vincent in mind. And this is not a burden but a joy, since around him, we discover each other. He summons us beyond the silly Western illusion that anyone is self-sufficient. In his needs, we discover our own need for each other. He frees us to be brothers, mutually dependent.

The letter of James says, 'Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.' (5.14). The community gathers around the bed of the person, but the sick person also helps us to be a community. Around that bed enmities are forgotten, and we each find that we have something to give and to receive.

The suffering person may also have some special gift for the community which no one else can give. Let us take Vincent again. Because he is blind, he depended upon his hearing. He heard sound bounce off the walls. He navigated around the rooms with his ears. And this meant that he was wonderfully sensitive to what the brethren say. He was appointed to the Formation team, because he could spot what was happening in the lives of the young, their strengths and weaknesses, more than most of us. His disability was a gift. He picked up the nuances that others miss. He heard our secret fears and hopes in our voices. We are all blind and deaf in some way, and sometimes the blind teach us to hear and the deaf teach us to see, and the lame give us the courage to take another step.

So, we can be grateful for the gifts that those who suffer bring to us. The symbol of our hope is a human being on a cross, wounded, vulnerable and soon to be dead. We meet him everywhere.