

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

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THE MESSAGE OF JESUS ABOUT HUMAN PAIN

Lent is a time when the Cross of Jesus speaks to us as a living symbol of God's merciful love. It stands like a beacon high on the hill of Calvary, its horizontal beams like arms outstretched to embrace all human anguish. It shows us that what seems to be an end of hope is really a new beginning.

St. Therese of Lisieux reflects on human suffering and how it has meaning beyond our personal endurance. "I accept with gratitude the thorns mingled with the flowers," she wrote. Why gratitude? She goes on, "My joy is to struggle unceasingly to bring forth spiritual children. I keep saying to Jesus, 'For you... I'm happy to suffer'" (*The Poetry*, p.185,6). She is explaining that new life can be brought forth from the womb of our tribulation. Thus the compression of pain which has us embedded within its tightening coil is broadened to reach out to others in their need. Personal pain is not self-enclosed but takes on apostolic power.

Therese declares, "Jesus made me understand that it was through suffering that He wanted to give me souls." She does not say that her apostolic longing made for an increase of suffering. She says "Jesus made me understand." In other words, grace enlightened her to see that suffering is not simply devastation but the seed of fruitfulness. The willing acceptance of what each day contained brought her "a peace so sweet, so deep it would be impossible to express...that inner peace has remained my lot, and has not abandoned me in the midst of the greatest trials" (*Story of a Soul*, p.148).

St. Therese ponders what suffering can do for us in time and also looks forward to an eternal recompense that rewards us for what we endure. She writes to her sister Leonie, "This thought of the shortness of life gives me courage, it helps me bear the fatigue of the road....Jesus has gone before us to prepare a place in the home of His Father....Let us wait....The hour of rest is approaching....I rejoice when seeing how much God loves you and is granting you His graces. He finds you worthy of suffering for His love, and it is the greatest proof of tenderness He can give you, for suffering makes us like Him (*Letters*, Lt 173, p. 896, 7). She is telling us adversity has its own special work to do in each human life.

But in what way does suffering make us like God? To understand that part of the mystery, we turn to the Gospels to see how Jesus relates to affliction. "Then He went about all Galilee...healing every disease and every infirmity among the people....They brought him all the sick, those weighed down with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics and He cured them all" (Mt 4: 23, 24). Here we see God Incarnate moving among us, revealing divine love in a human heart which beats with compassion for every member of the crowd that followed Him. The infirm were released from their afflictions. Nevertheless, ahead of them lay further afflictions--of body and mind and heart. Their deliverance through the touch of Jesus was only a temporary release because life held out further losses. Or was it only

temporary? What does Jesus do when He touches a human life? What takes place? What is so good about the Good News?

We Christians, like all other children of planet earth, are born into a reality that will necessarily incorporate grief and lamentation. We accept this actuality and reject any explanation that says our sorrowing is a waste or based on illusion. To unlock the meaning of our ordeals, we climb a hill where God-become-human dies in agony. After that culminating event, everything else in the world's history has a new illumination--a light born out of the darkness of Calvary. We see the awesome spectacle of a God in utmost need, struggling in our pain. St. Therese describes the face of Jesus as "luminous... in the midst of wounds and tears" (Letters, Lt 95, p.580).

The primal sin was accepting the serpent's promise, "You will be like gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). And from that human decision came suffering and death. Who would have conceived of a divine response to this original betrayal whereby God would embrace the very penalty imposed upon sin: suffering and death? The Psalms of the Hebrew Bible sing over and over of God's abundant kindness, of God's steadfast love. Yet we Christians sing of a mercy that not only pours out compassion but enters into the experience of our desolation. We have an infinite God who has willed to feel our limitations, even our small ones. Jesus does not explain human existence from afar. He allowed Himself to be restrained by the boundaries of the humanity He shares with us. But in so doing, He transforms those very limitations and endows them with power.

He looks at us in whatever lameness is holding us back from moving forward with Him. His words sound in our ears. **"Get up and walk"** (Mt 9:5). With His power energizing us, we know the path before us this very day--yes, with all its difficulties--leads to eternal life.

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(The quotations from St. Therese are from the translation of her works published by the Institute of Carmelite Studies, available at 1-800-832-8489 .)