

Friday (Fr. Richard Rohr.)

Rising and dying are closely related. Despair, I suspect, is another kind of dying and another kind of pain. It is not so much the loss of persons as the loss of ideals, visions and plans. The crash of images is experienced as a death of the spirit, as a loss of hope, as a darkness almost too much to bear. Until we walk with this despair, we will not know that our hope was hope in *ourselves*, in *our* successes, in *our* power to make a difference, in *our* image of what perfection and wholeness should be. Until we walk with this despair, we will never uncover the hope on the other side of human achievement. Until we allow the crash and crush of our images we will never discover the real life beyond what only seems like death.

Scripture (Mk. 1:32-38)

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were sick with diseases of one kind or another; he also drove out many devils. In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and went to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him said "Everybody is looking for you." He answered "Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because this is why I came."

martben1@btinternet.com

5th week of Ordinary time

Where there was darkness there is light

Job's gloomy summing up of life for humans is perfectly understandable, given the amount of troubles which have come his way. His experience tells him that life is nothing more being forced to work for someone else: all toil, with none of the rewards coming to him. He is quite clear that the only benefit is that it is brief and that soon he will be dead and suffer no more, (Job 7:1-7). This is all an answer to his friend Eliphaz who had come up with a comforting explanation for Job's suffering: he was being punished by God for his sins, (either wilful or unwitting), and that it was for his own good, because after the faults had been corrected, all would be well.

This is a familiar line of argument today, presented either as an angry God justifiably inflicting suffering on sinners, or the more resigned version, the "God is good, he has a reason for all this / it will be worth it in the end/ the rewards will be greater than the suffering" line of thought. Both of these seem content to allow God to willingly see people suffer. Job refuses to accept this: he knows he is innocent. He cannot for the life of him understand why God inflicts all this on him because he knows he is a completely upright man – even in his pain and bewilderment he does not stop believing in God, nor does he stray from acting in an upright way. He does not doubt that God exists, but does not accept any justice in the suffering which afflicts him: he asks why would God 'scrutinise' and test someone as weak and insignificant as he, a mere human. What Job doesn't know is that it is actually Satan who is inflicting the suffering, to test Job's faith. His wretched life of pointless suffering, therefore, is actually how life is when evil holds sway.

The number of people who need curing when Jesus starts his public life make clear that there were many people living wretched lives. It is worth remembering that life expectancy was shorter, and life in general more precarious than it is for Northern Hemisphere Christians today, so they would more readily identify with Job's assessment of human existence. As they were both types of suffering were held to be the result of the power of evil, or of God's punishment, the actions of Jesus are hugely significant: he, the Holy One of God, has greater power than evil, and it is not God who punishes with suffering: God wishes to heal at all levels.

Following this success, Jesus makes time to pray, to be in communion with his Father. Peter and his friends are keen for him to be busy doing more of the same, but Jesus insists that they go to other places to proclaim the Kingdom of God has arrived. The cures and the driving out of evil spirits are the evidence of what he proclaims, not the primary reason he came. If he followed the apostles' advice, he would be doing what Job's friends expected: providing the good times after the bad. Clearly, Jesus wanted to do more than 'make things better': that was the first stage, the sign, of bringing God's reign on earth.

Significantly, Peter's mother in laws reaction when she was cured was to serve: even allowing for the expectations on women then, I imagine serving Jesus was done joyfully rather than as drudgery. It suggests that Jesus did not come to 'make everything alright', but to remove the futility of life. This doesn't mean that there will be no struggle, no dark days, but it does mean that we are not 'hired hands' but co-workers with Jesus in building the Kingdom: "I no longer call you servants, but friends". Martin Bennett

Monday (Viktor Frankl)

One time we were at work in a trench. The dawn was grey around us; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces. I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes!” to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen.

Scripture (Rom 8:35-39)

Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ—can hardships or distress or persecution, or lack of food or clothing, or threats or violence? No; we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights or the depths, nor any created thing whatever will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Tuesday (Martin Luther King Jr.)

My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life. Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no-way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Scripture (Ps. 40:10-12,16-17)

I have not kept your saving justice locked in the depths of my heart but have spoken of your constancy and saving help. I have made no secret of your faithful and steadfast love in the great assembly. For troubles surround me until they are beyond number; my sins have overtaken me; I cannot see my way. They outnumber the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me. But joy and happiness in you to all who seek you! Let them ceaselessly cry ‘Great is Yahweh’ who I’ve your saving power. Poor and needy as I am, the Lord has me in mind. You, my helper, my Saviour, my God, do not delay.

Wednesday (Henri Nouwen)

We tend to divide our past into good things to remember with gratitude and painful things to accept or regret. This way of thinking, which at first glance seems quite natural, prevents us from allowing our whole past to be the source from which we live our future. It locks us into a self-involved focus on our gain or comfort. If God is to be found in our hard times, then all of life can open us to God’s work among us. As we come to God with our hurts—honestly not superficially—something life-changing can begin slowly to happen. We discover how God is the one who invites us to healing. We realise that any dance of celebration must weave both the sorrows and the blessings into a joyful step.

Scripture (Philippians 4:4-7)

Always be joyful, then, in the Lord; I repeat, be joyful. Let your good sense be obvious to everybody. The Lord is near. Never worry about anything, but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus.

Thursday (Thomas Cullinan, OSB)

I think that staying power is a quality we need very badly. People seem to lack long-term courage, that creative patience—not apathy, but the sort of patience that knows how to go on and on until the end appears—to hang on to the vision until it is possible to be creative with it, and not to give up one’s vision just because the thing seems hopeless. The New Testament writers had a word for it: “hypomene”. It meant “patient endurance,” the ability to be poised to do what needed doing even though all the going seemed to be against one. And that staying power calls on deep spiritual resources, on a deep peace within ourselves.

Scripture (Ps. 22:1-2,19, 22-25)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The words of my groaning do nothing to save me. My God, I call by day but you do not answer, at night, but I find no respite. Yahweh, do not hold aloof! My strength, come quickly to my help. I shall proclaim your name to my brothers, praise you in full assembly. For he has not despised nor disregarded the poverty of the poor, has not turned away his face, but has listened to the cry for help.