

Friday (Fr. Richard Rohr.)

The supreme irony of the whole crucifixion scene is this: He who was everything had everything taken away from him. Jesus was nailed to the cross, his arms nailed open. He is the eternal sign of God to humans, yet his arms were nailed open because he said in his life "I love you". When you say this, you give the other power over you: power to destroy you and power to create you. Jesus spoke these words to his creation and we took him at his word. But God says "I love you anyway!" That is God's great act of reconciliation. What hope!

Scripture (Hebrews 4:15-16, 5:7-9)

The high priest we have is not incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us, but has been put to the test in exactly the same way as ourselves, apart from sin. Let us, then, have no fear in approaching the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace when we are in need of help. During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, to the one who had the power to save him from death, and, winning a hearing by his reverence, he learnt obedience, Son though he was, through his sufferings; when he had been perfected, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation.

Holy Week

The road to the Cross is paved with God's intentions

Isaiah 50:4-7 describes in detail the suffering inflicted on the servant by his enemies. The sentence, 'For my part, I made no resistance, neither did I turn away' referred, I assumed, to this suffering. I, of course, (and reasonably), associate this with the suffering of Jesus, but this interpretation has rather skewed my understanding of the cross in two ways: the passive 'making no resistance' fits into the 'meek and mild' Jesus which can lead to a rather tame Christianity of 'being nice' to people, including 'enemies'; secondly, the emphasis is entirely on the suffering, leading to the conclusion that it is through this that Jesus fulfils his mission.

The punctuation in the New Jerusalem Bible radically alters this interpretation: God has 'opened my ear and I have not resisted, I have not turned away.' (from what he is being told). He is clearly being used as an instrument, woken to 'listen like a disciple'. In Isaiah, the disciple must experience himself what he is to transmit to others. In this case, the servant is completely obedient to God. He will encounter suffering and rejection, and it is then that he will know that he can put all his trust in God. Having experienced this, the disciple can reply to the weary, he can be a sign of God's saving love to others. St. Paul, (Philippians, 2:6-11), is able to look back to the death of Jesus and see that it is the humility and the emptying of himself, 'assuming the condition of a slave' which allowed God to raise him and so allow all to come to know God through him.

Becoming as men are, Jesus was fully immersed into all the fears, short-sightedness which thinks we have all the answers, hunger for power, pride which thinks we can 'go it alone' etc etc; all the flaws which mean we continually turn away from what God offers, and which cause us to inflict suffering on others. All these flaws are played out in the various characters who reject Jesus and put him on the cross. It is, I think, important not to dismiss Judas, the High Priests or any 'enemies' as simply violent or greedy: they almost certainly believed they were doing the right thing. ('Father forgive them, they know not what they are doing'). It is also important to ponder the depths of Jesus' fear and confusion in Gethsemane: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup away' suggests to me not only fear of what lies ahead, but also a desperate prayer of 'why this way?'. The deeper I understand what Jesus was going through, the deeper my understanding of 'your will, not mine': this obedience is at least as significant as the scourging and nails.

The charge above Jesus is 'King of the Jews'. The soldiers, representing military might, mock him, failing to see how this suffering and powerless man can be king; the religious leaders mock him: Jesus is unable to show any sign, (saving himself) to prove to their satisfaction that he is from God.

When Jesus dies, then, he dies unrecognised and rejected. His friends and followers stand at a distance, and must have been appalled and distraught: to them, it has, at this moment, all gone terribly – and conclusively – wrong. When he dies, though, is he quoting Ps. 31:5 'into your hands, I commend my spirit, by you have I been redeemed'? The centurion and the second thief are the only ones who have a glimpse that God is present in this desolate scene. They were able to do this without knowing the 'happy ending'. If I make Holy Week a prayerful time, pondering, without resistance, on the obedience and trust which led to the cross I can, perhaps, be redeemed from the shortcomings I share with so many of the characters who rejected Jesus. Martin Bennett

Monday (Fr. Austin Smith, CP)

The suffering and dying of God is regarded as essential to reach the resurrection, to which we can't get quickly enough. But this underpins not a theology of the resurrection but a superficial ideology of hope. Before outlining vast theologies of redemption, indeed before talking about the wonder of the Resurrection we should contemplate the absurdity of the death of Jesus. An open contemplation of the death of Jesus, leading to a mystical union with God, leads us to examine the depth of our assimilation of, and relationship to, the values of Jesus. It often seems that it is only at the death of someone that we come to understand, in any depth, our relationship with them.

Scripture (Psalm 42)

I thirst for God, the living God; when shall I go to see the face of God? I have no food but tears, day and night, as all day long I am taunted 'Where is your God?' I shall say to God 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go around in mourning, harassed by the enemy?' Hope in God! I will praise him still, my Saviour, my God. Send out your light and your truth, they shall be my guide, to lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

Tuesday ((Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, it is closely associated with the prediction of his passion. He must suffer and be rejected. Had he only suffered, Jesus might still have been applauded as the Messiah. All the sympathy and admiration of the world might have been focused on his passion. It could have been viewed as a tragedy with its own intrinsic value, dignity and honour. But in the passion, Jesus is a rejected Messiah. His rejection robs the passion of its halo of glory. Suffering and rejection sum up the whole cross of Jesus. This notion has ceased to be intelligible to a Christianity which can no longer see any difference between an ordinary human life and a life committed to Christ.

Scripture (Mt. 27:39-44)

The passers-by jeered at him: "So you would destroy the Temple and in three days rebuild it! Then save yourself if you are God's son and come down from the cross!" The chief priests and the scribes and elders mocked him in the same way "He saved others but he cannot save himself. Let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him. He has put his trust in God; now let God rescue him if he wants him" Even the bandits who were with him taunted him in the same way.

Wednesday (Martin Luther)

'Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. My comprehension transcends yours. Thus Abraham went forth from his father not knowing where he was going. He trusted himself to my knowledge and cared not for his own, and came to his journey's end. Behold, that is the way of the cross. The road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or desire—that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple.'

Scripture (Ps. 22)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. The words of my groaning do nothing to save me. My God, I call you by day but you do not answer, at night, but I find no respite. Yet you, the Holy One, in you our ancestors out their trust, they trusted you and you set them free. But I am a worm, not a man, scorn of mankind, contempt of the people; all who see me sneer and wag their heads, 'He trusted himself to Yahweh, let Yahweh set him free!' Do not hold aloof, for trouble is upon me, and no one to help me.

Thursday (Henri Nouwen)

"Can you drink the cup I shall drink?" pierced my heart like a sharp spear. I knew that taking this moment seriously would radically change our lives. It is the question that has the power to crack open a hardened heart and lay bare the tendons of the spiritual life. But why should we drink this cup? There is so much pain, so much anguish, so much violence. Wouldn't it be easier to live normal lives with a minimum of pain and a maximum of pleasure? "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" Just letting that question sink in made me feel very uncomfortable. But I knew that I had to start living with it.

Scripture (Mark 10:35-39)

James and John said to Jesus, "We want you to do us a favour. Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left hand in glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I shall drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I will be baptised?" They replied, "We can."