

Good Friday 2022

It is common to say that we do not get to resurrection without going through crucifixion.

This means that what is truly worthwhile is not achieved without challenges.

That is especially true of learning how to love, which involves turning from self-involvement outward, toward others.

In fact, as we talked about yesterday, our challenges bestow blessings.

They push us from one side as love pulls us from the other.

By facing his own crucifixion, mostly while praying in Gethsemane, Jesus reached the point that he could forgive those who wanted to end his ministry, his truth telling, by subjecting him to torture and death.

He came to understand that they knew not what they were doing, that they had become lost trying to find their way in the world.

They had much more to learn, as we discussed on the fifth Sunday in Lent, but will not do so as long as they remain utopian, demanding purity and perfection while running from challenges and seeking scapegoats, Jesus among them.

We must instead do the frightening work of looking honestly within, the work that Christ was doing as he prayed.

We know that crucifixion did not silence Jesus, but actually assured that his message succeeded.

Through crucifixion, he achieved his goal of spreading the message of love and setting humanity back on course.

He had to die, it seems, that we might live.

His death was not an act of magic.

Jesus did not teach us, in other words, that we had to believe some philosophy, creed, or theology about his crucifixion that we might be magically saved.

Jesus taught us instead that we were to believe in him, that is, to trust him.

He was calling us to *metanoia*, to an opening of the heart to what is.

We do not achieve that without the death of our vanity, insecurity, and jealousy, so that we can be reborn a new, freer person.

We therefore say that *we are baptized into the death of Jesus*.

There is no salvation without change, no growth without opening our hearts.

We must go, in other words, through our own crucifixion, our own letting go.

That may be a slow and steady experience, or sudden and dramatic.

Whatever the case, it challenges us to be more fully, wholly who God created us to be.

It is a kind of self-acceptance.

We are a mixture of light and dark, beings held in the tension of existence between various conflicting factors that we cannot vanquish.

The measure of us is how well we integrate our whole, conflictual being to spread the gospel of love, not how well we suppress the darkness in us and pretend that we are only light.

We find God dancing between the light and shadows, *within* the tension.

There is no light, you see, without dark, and the brighter the light, the darker the shadow.

If we lose sight of our own darkness, we lose sight of part of ourselves and miss God who is in everything.

We must, therefore, face our darkness with honesty and compassion, just as we must face our crucifixion when it comes.

Those who crucified him were determined to make the world perfect in their own image.

They would kill him, torture him, break his legs, in an attempt to make him into nothing, a meaningless object, so that their desires would be unchallenged, so that the world would conform to their version of perfection, but try as they might, they were unable to force the world into their mold.

There is always tension within ourselves and between ourselves and others.

That is the nature of existence.

We thus set aside Good Friday to reflect on the crucifixion that necessarily precedes rebirth.

It is in such times that God might feel absent.

Though we tend to blame God for abandoning us, we are like toddlers who wander into another room and scream because our parent is not visible.

I have told you about my acquaintance, the young son of a parishioner, who died twice as the result of the same overdose that occurred as he sought escape from the tension of existence, escape from darkness.

When I got to the hospital, Dr. Patel came in and said to his mother and me, “He is on full life support. Only prayer can save him now.”

His mother prayed vigorously.

I did not pray to God so much as talk to the young man.

I told him that it was between him and God.

If he wanted to come back, only God could make that happen.

Personally, I added, I would like to see him back here.

In about an hour, his body jumped as if he had reentered it with a thud, and he opened his eyes.

That began a long recovery.

Once he had improved (he had sustained some permanent organ damage), he talked to me about what happened while he was dead.

He said that he had gone to a place that was hard to describe, but the best he could do was to say that it was gray and hopeless.

It was the first time, he explained, that he had ever experienced the absence of God.

That is how far away he had wondered.

Up to that point, though he had not realized it, God had always been at his side even as he sought to escape.

God was there even in the shadows, but in his attempt to escape both the darkness in himself and the challenges he encountered in the world, in his attempt to find a tension-free existence, he had lost sight of God entirely.

He had ignored part of himself, a part that made him uncomfortable, and had sought only what was exciting and comforting in the moment.

In the process, he had lost what is truly important.

We cannot come partially before God.

It is in living out fully our existence in all its tension that we make our path forward.

We must face what *is* in order that we, too, might resurrect.

But more about that at the Easter Vigil.