

Divine Solidarity

“I have surely seen the oppression of My people and have heard their cry for I know their sorrows. So, I have come down to deliver them.” (Exod. 3.7-8)

People often wonder why God allows so much suffering in the world. This question remains one of the greatest difficulties of faith. Perhaps the only theodicy the Church can offer is that divine silence which suffered on the Cross, the pulpit from which God preached His love for the world in His solidarity with her suffering. We might not know why there is suffering, but we know that He suffers with us. The timeless scene in Gethsemane brings this reality to the fore. The story begins in a garden and ends in a garden (John 19.41) but now we behold the trees and bounty choked by “thorns and thistles” (Gen. 3.18). Mired in the atrophy of death, the Tree of Life wilts where it once stood, disfigured by the contagion of sin. Lying prostrate where He once walked (Gen. 3.8), God trudges the path of His Passion. Every punishment exacted, every penalty ever decreed, every curse uttered was now directed against Him.

How could Justice accept condemnation by its own law? Why would the Sun plunge its rays in the lightless void? How does infinitude empty itself and become nothing? Can it really be possible? Can Life take on the pronouncement of our death - “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground” (Gen. 3.19)? Christ eats the perishable bread of death, baked in Bethlehem,⁷³ leavened by the world’s sin, bread which reduces man’s flesh to the dust of the ground - “He went a little farther and fell on the ground” (Mark 14.35). The Lord of Hosts, languished by the bread of our sin, lies on the ground with sweat drops of blood dripping from His brow (Gen. 3.19) to the depths of the earth.

The infinite Power of God becomes nothing for our sake. “Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him” (Luke 22.43). What a spectacle! The heavens are summoned to help God! Jacob’s Ladder is inverted: the angels descend from heaven to God on

earth. The creature strengthens the Creator; the work of God’s hands, made from nothing, comes to give Him power. Chesterton’s words resound, “Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete.”¹⁹² Our weakness subjects His omnipotence; our infirmities wound His impassibility; the blight of our evil emaciates His beauty; our sin dons His immortality in the mantle of our death: “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death” (Matt. 26.38). The Self-Existent wails in torment as He bears the onerous burden of the world!

“What! Could you not watch with Me one hour?” (Matt. 26.40)

We sleep while He suffers. We remiss in dreams as He faces our nightmares. He confronts our sin with the vigilance of life; we are consumed by the slumber of death. We cannot bear to look at Him. He is not well. He is stricken with grief. He is by Himself. He bears the injustice of this world alone, the denial of friends, the abandonment of companions, the duplicity of loved ones: rejection, deception, betrayal. His Life is the tragedy of tragedies, yet it is the ‘victory that has overcome the world’ (1 John 5.4).⁷⁴

Looming in the distance, Hades’ emissaries band together, armed and ready to arrest the Boundless, colluding to cast Life in the pit of death. He feels the immensity of His trial: Temptation befalls Him

yet again; the doubts of humanity whisper: “Who are You to take this on? Save Yourself. Let this cup pass.” “He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him” (Mark 14.35) - God, experiencing our pain, desires to free us of our suffering – “prayed that...the hour might pass from Him” - more than we, yet not without our salvation – “Your will be done!” (Matt. 26.42). He would take all the pain instead of us, yet even this is not good for us.

Now He is led to that most terrible of punishments and His arms extend to embrace the world in her suffering. The brutality of tyrants, the disgrace of murderers, the ignominy of rapists lies here. The guilt of inmates, the poverty of indigents, the shame of outcasts rests on these shoulders. He subsumes our suffering in His Body, crying out to every oppressor “Why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9.4) The injustices of the world are the nails piercing His flesh; the tyranny of evil presses on His head as the crown of thorns; the sentence of death inflicted on humanity is the lance thrust in His side.

Every victim’s blood shed since the beginning of time runs through His veins: “He is covered with the scarlet blood of all the martyrs destined to reign with Him”¹⁹³ writes Hilary of Poitiers. “Look for Him...who for our sakes suffered, Him who endured everything in every form for our sakes”¹⁹⁴ writes Ignatius to Polycarp. St. Cyprian of Carthage also writes:

“He Himself suffered the lash, in Whose Name His servants now scourge the devil and his angels. He Who now crowns the martyrs with eternal garlands was Himself crowned with thorns...He Who now gives true palms to victors was beaten in the face with hostile palms; He Who clothes all others with the garment of immortality was stripped of His earthly garment.”¹⁹⁵

Cain murders Christ and is justified in Abel. Betrayed by the tribes of Israel, He is sold as a slave, imprisoned, and crowned with victory rescuing His brothers from perdition. The Egyptians enslave Him and He is liberated, releasing His people from bondage. He stands in the flames of the furnace and delivers the three youth. He sleeps in the lions’ den and emerges unscathed in Daniel. In orange garbs He marches along the Libyan seashores condemned to die with the twenty-one martyrs and escorts them to the shores of Paradise.

The Tree of the Cross is the burning bush, the cosmos blazing with Christ’s sacrificial love yet never consumed by suffering; and we are its branches “hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4.8-10). Not only does He walk with us, but He lives inside us intimately, bearing our betrayals, insults, disorders and rejections that in all these we may have peace knowing Him as Emmanuel – God with us.