

Luke 23:1-49 (Passion of Our Lord)

There is an awful lot of suffering in the world today and perhaps in the life of each of us. However, it should be a great consolation for all those who suffer to know that Christ suffered too. We've just read the Passion Story. But we tend to skim over it. We've heard it so many times that perhaps it no longer makes an impression upon us. We may even be tempted to think that Christ's suffering was not for real – that somehow it was different for him. After all he was the Son of God. Besides, he was only carrying out the Father's plan. He did not choose it freely. It was all planned that way from the very beginning.

First we need to clarify that Christ's suffering was real. It was no play-acting. If anything, his suffering was more intense than others, given the fact that he was such a caring and sensitive person. It is the one who dares to love who leaves himself open to the possibility of very deep hurt if that love is rejected. Secondly, Christ's suffering was freely chosen. This having been said, let us look briefly at some of the pain he endured during his passion.

He suffered the pain of being let down by his friends: *'This night all of you will abandon me.'* What is worse, he suffered the pain of being betrayed by one of them – Judas.

Consider the fear and anguish he suffered in the garden. It was so intense that he asked his Father to remove it from him. And he had no one with whom to share

his agony. The three on whom he was relying were fast asleep.

He suffered the hurt of being arrested and tried for something he never did – break the law or cause trouble. He was falsely accused and subjected to a barrage of lies. He endured insults, blows, taunts, spitting; then the lash of the whip and the piercing of the thorns.

Finally came the shame of being condemned to death like a common criminal. As he died he had to endure more taunts, insults and mockery. And where was God? Wherever he was, he kept his silence.

Who could measure the depths of what Christ suffered? Yet all this suffering would have been wasted, and would not have redeemed even one small corner of the world, if he had not endured it with love. It was not Christ's suffering that saved the world. It was his love – the love with which he bore and offered his sufferings to the Father for us.

He showed us how to bear our sufferings. Helder Camara, the Portuguese Archbishop once said: 'Some people are like sugar-cane, even when crushed in the mill, completely squashed, reduced to pulp, all they yield is sweetness.' Christ was like that. Even though surrounded by darkness, the lamp of his love was still burning brightly, enabling him to enlighten others. He prayed for his executioners. He welcomed the good thief into paradise. He asked John to take care of his mother. With one look of compassion he brought tears of repentance to the eyes of Peter.

He even elicited an act of faith from the Roman centurion who had conducted his execution. He died because he did the will of his Father – freely and out of love. He was the Good Shepherd dying because he loved his sheep.

Suffering that is merely endured does nothing for our souls except perhaps harden them – turning us in upon ourselves and making us sorry for ourselves. Renunciation and sacrifice are worthless unless related to love. A mother would never by choice sleep in a cold, wet bed, but she would gladly do so in order to spare the warm, dry bed for her sick child. It is the spirit in which we bear our burden that matters. Two people can go through the same painful experience. It can destroy and weaken one yet strengthen and enrich the other.

Mother Teresa said: “Everywhere there is much suffering, but there is also great hunger for God and love for each other. Suffering in itself is nothing; but suffering shared with Christ’s passion is a wonderful gift. Man’s most beautiful gift is that he can share in the passion of Christ. Yes, a gift and a sign of his love; because this is how his Father proved that he loved the world – by giving his Son to die for us. And so in Christ it was proved that the greatest gift is love: because suffering was how he paid for sin.”

Suffering gives us the opportunity to learn compassion. But, many waste this opportunity. Self-pity robs them of the benefit of the suffering. Self-pity is the first and normal reaction to suffering. But, it is a cancer which erodes our courage and destroys our capacity to love. Our pain can bear fruit. Our suffering, properly borne,

can become even a privilege, a call to the highest things. As Thoreau says: 'It defends you from being a trifler.'

It is not suffering that redeems us and the world, but love. This cannot be said too often. Some people seem to have a morbid love of suffering, but they tend to be rather bitter people. All that Christ asks of us is love. It's true that love can cause the greatest pain of all – heartbreak. But it can also bring life's greatest joy.

Ghandi said: 'Mankind would perish if there were no exhibition anytime and anywhere of the divine in man.' And Thomas Merton wrote: 'The Christian must not only accept suffering: he must make it holy. Nothing so easily becomes unholy as suffering.'

This is beautifully illustrated in one of my favourite Easter stories, *The Ragman*, by Walter Wangerin, Jr. based on Isaiah who wrote: *Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*

Before dawn one Friday morning, a strong, handsome young man walked the alleys of the city. The six-foot-four man with arms like tree limbs was pulling an old cart, filled with new clothes. He called in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags! New rags for old! I'll take your tired rags!"

Soon the Ragman came upon a sobbing woman sitting on her back porch. Her shoulders shook as her head was buried within her hands. Her heart was breaking. The Ragman stopped his cart and stepped around tin cans, broken toys, and other debris as he quietly walked to the woman. He said to her gently, "Give me your rag, and I'll give you another."

He slipped the kerchief from her. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked, and stopped crying.

Then, as the Ragman pulled his cart away, he put her kerchief to his face, and he began to weep, as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. He continued calling, "Rags! Rags! New rags for old!"

The Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a blood-soaked bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. The tall Ragman looked at her with pity, and he withdrew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart. He said, "Give me your rag and I'll give you mine."

The child gazed at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. He put the bonnet on her head. And the wound went with the bandage! But the blood ran darker; it was the Ragman's.

The sobbing, bleeding Ragman pressed on as he cried out, "Rags! Rags! I take old rags!" He met a man leaning against a telephone pole and asked him, "Are you going to work?" After the man shook "no," the Ragman pressed him: "Do you have

a job?" The man scoffed, "Are you crazy?" He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

With quiet authority, the Ragman said, "Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine." The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman – and the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve. When the unemployed man put it on, he had two good arms, but the Ragman had only one. He encouraged him, "Go to work."

After that he found an old drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket. The Ragman took the blanket off the hunched, shrivelled, and sick old man. He wrapped it around himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

The Ragman was weeping uncontrollably, bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, and stumbling from drunkenness. And yet, he skittered through the alleys until he came to the city limits. The sickly Ragman came to a landfill – the garbage pits. He climbed a hill. With great labour he cleared a little space and sighed as he lay down. He formed the kerchief and the jacket into a pillow. He covered his tired body with the army blanket. And then he died.

But on Sunday morning, a pure but violent light shined on that hill. There was the Ragman, carefully folding the blanket. He had a scar on his forehead, but he was alive! There was no sign of age or sorrow, and all the rags that he had gathered looked like new. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!

This week each year Christians are drawn to Jerusalem, if not in body, at least

in mind. They stand at the foot of the cross, beating their breasts, and staring with pity at Jesus of Nazareth. 'Don't cry for me,' says Jesus. 'Cry for yourselves and for your children – the children who will inherit your fears, prejudices and hates.' Let us not then weep for Jesus. Let us make every person we encounter grow into the likeness of Christ, to allow them to live their life of compassion and humanity in the world of today. Keep the love and light of Christ always burning in your heart for he alone is the Way to walk, He is the Life to live. He is the Love to love.

Amen.