

The Lord's Suffering

Some time ago I had an opportunity to see the film on the famous shroud of Turin, as it is called. Thought by some to be the burial cloth wrapped around Jesus after He had been taken down from the cross after the crucifixion. Intriguing and thought provoking as the film was, it necessarily dwelt upon the physical suffering which Jesus must have gone through after His arrest.

Like most people I hadn't known that the thongs of the whip with which He would have been scourged were studded with metal. Pellets to cause maximum suffering and maximum damage. No wonder a person often died from the scourging before crucifixion could take place. And no wonder either that Jesus staggered under the weight of the cross He had to carry. No one is comfortable contemplating the physical agony which Jesus must have gone through. The crown of thorns, nails driven through the wrists, and all the other things.

Great as that physical suffering can only have been, and as if it were not enough, yet it was not the only suffering that the Lord knew at that time. He experienced along with it, suffering of another and even greater kind. A mental torment and anguish with which He struggled and which was more hurtful to bear than the physical injuries inflicted on His body. Everything that He had fought for, striven after and hoped to achieve, seemed to be lost. All now and at the end, seemed to be in vain. And He can only have been desperate; desperate and desolate. As it were, heart broken.

He had come to remove hell from the lives of people, and yet all He could see and hear was hell around Him. The mocking and the jeers, the face slapping, the rejection, the laughter, the humiliation. The appearance was that He had failed in what He had come on earth to do. Hence His anguish and sorrow and sense of desolation. And such is the teaching given, that mental anguish was harder to bear than the physical torture and bodily pain inflicted upon Him.

We get a glimpse of the Lord's mental anguish and suffering in Luke's Gospel Chapter 22 where we read of the Lord praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (verse 44). Clearly something was tormenting Him within. He was wrestling with something, and, we repeat the point, His anguish was greater because of that. The physical suffering was secondary.

We have already touched on what it was that troubled the Lord and caused Him such agony. But because it is important, we do well to look at it in more detail.

Jesus was God come on earth. God Himself. Jehovah as He was known, the one God of heaven and earth, descended into the world to overcome and to reduce to order the power of the hells. Evil from hell was beginning to have such a dominating influence over the minds and lives of people that very soon everyone everywhere would have been caught up in a current sweeping them along and against which, even if they had had a mind to do, they would have been powerless.

So God. descended, assuming human nature by birth of Mary, so that through victories in temptation conflicts, He might overcome the power of the hells, restore free will and so, open up again the possibilities of our choosing and living the life that leads to heaven. Out of His love for the salvation and happiness of mankind God came into the world. And it was this love for the salvation and happiness of mankind which was the motivating factor behind all that He did here. His love, His objective, His great desire, was to secure again the possibilities of our salvation. That is what mattered. This was forever there.

On earth, and 'clothed' with a human mind and body, there were times when, for Jesus, the reality of things was obscured and He was swayed by the appearance of things. This is how He could be tempted. He was, in a very real way, subject at times to the inevitable limitations which frail and infirm human nature could impose on His thinking. The devil, you remember, came and tempted the Lord by dangling in front of Him an appearance of success.

"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." (Matthew 4, v 8 & 9). But the Lord saw through the appearance. It would only have been a phony, empty success. He hadn't come to win earthly glory and power. Our point in mentioning the incident is that it illustrates the way in which appearances, as we keep referring to them, were used to try to cloud the Lord's thinking. He was, as we say again, subject to such appearances. The limited vision and understanding of the human He had assumed in coming into the world would, from time to time, act as a kind of blanket blocking out Divine perception and understanding which He otherwise had from within.

We have a parallel experience which helps us to understand what was involved. There are times when the appearance of things blocks out an inner understanding and conviction with us, and when this happens we are vulnerable. We hear or read of some tragic accident, for example, and the appearance of God uncaring, remote, and distant, which can come to us in such situations, blocks out and obscures the deeper conviction and understanding we have that He does care and, far from being remote and distant, is working within the situation that good may come of it somehow.

Jesus, who was God incarnate in the human, born of Mary, was subject to appearances. His inner, divine, perception and understanding was from time to time, clouded over and obscured. And that's when He was vulnerable. That's when the forces of evil were trying their hardest to sway and influence Him. They were busy at work within that appearance, hoping He would accept it as the real thing. Just like the devil hoped that Jesus would accept the vision of all the kingdoms of the world at His feet as a vision of success and accomplishment.

As His ministry on earth drew to a close, and as the opposition to Him mounted and became fiercer, the appearance which came to Jesus was that He had failed. As we said earlier, He had come on earth to remove hell from man and yet as He contemplated betrayal by one of His disciples, denial by another, the cowardice of the others, a mob thronging to Him on Palm Sunday for purely worldly and external reasons, the trumped up charges brought against Him and the hatred of His accusers, it seemed or appeared, that all had been in vain, and of to no avail. He had come on earth to subjugate the hells, but here were the hells apparently right on top. Hence His agony and anguish. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." (Matthew 26, 38).

You may well wonder at the intensity and severity of such agony and anguish, particularly when it is compared to bodily and physical suffering. But when we stop and think about it we realise that agony of the soul and spirit can be every bit as painful and heart rending, even more so, than physical suffering. Where, for instance, people love each other there is agony at the prospect of the loss of that love. And the deeper and more intense the love is so, correspondingly, is the agony deeper and more intense.

Indeed the agony is in the same measure as the depth of the love at stake. If the love is only superficial, very little pain is felt at its loss. If the love is deep, then the agony is the greater. The Lord's love was the highest and most intense of all loves. It was the love of the salvation of the human race. We can only have a very general and vague idea of His agony as He contemplated a situation which seemed to tell Him that that love was unwanted and that, acting on it, He had failed.

This was His agony. This was the intensity of the sorrow He felt at the time. To unselfishly want something so much but to be faced with the appearance that it had not been acquired.

"All temptation" we read "is an assault upon the love in which the man is; and the temptation is in the same degree as the love. If the love is not assailed, it is no temptation. To destroy anyone's love is to destroy His very life. The Lord's life was love towards the whole human race. Against this, His life, continual temptations were admitted from earliest childhood to His last hour.

(Arcana Caelestia 1690).

On Easter Sunday, we celebrate the Lord's victory. His victory, however, over what?

The answer is His victory over appearances. The fact that He fought His way through them and did not allow Himself to be irrevocably swayed by them. The fact that He held on and waited for the cloud to pass and for Divine perception to break through once again. He did not give into the appearance of failure, and accept it was the real thing. He did not give up His love for mankind, try to hit back or hurt, as He was being hurt. He held on. This was His victory. On the one hand, the picture is of the hells desperate for a victory at last over Him. Desperate to have Him give in, perhaps to curse His tormentors. But He didn't do it. This was His great victory. That He saw through the appearance, that He overcame the hells.

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