

Reflection for September

Theme: Exaltation of the Cross

The Nail

*The nail is used for many things,
A useful securing tool;
A hammer is taken by the hand
And drives it, that's the rule.
A nail is needed when you build,
It's a necessary thing.
It was also used over two thousand years ago
To hang upon a tree, the King.
He took the pain and suffering
For all mankind, you see.
Yet He took the torture just for you,
And He took it just for me.
You cannot keep a good man down,
Through the years many have said.
He went down a man and rose a King
To deliver the spiritually dead.
He is on the throne
At God's right hand.
The First, the Last,
The Great I Am.
No nail, no hammer can touch Him now--
The mighty King on high.
What He built is forevermore,
Salvation for you and I.
So when you see a simple nail with its sharpened end,
And need to build or repair,
Lift up your eyes, your heart, and mind
And thank Him with a prayer.
--Laurene H. Bell*

The feast of Exaltation of the Cross began with the discovery of the Real Cross of Christ by St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine followed by the dedication of the Churches in the holy sites of Holy Sepulchre and Mt. Calvary. However, what does it mean for us *today*?

When the constant grumbling, fretting and complaining of the Israelites in the desert brought upon them fiery serpents whose bite killed a number of them, as a remedy God asked them to build a bronze serpent. The bronze serpent was lifted up and anyone who had been bitten by a snake was only to look at the bronze serpent and he was healed. (ref Num 21:6-8). This of course, is only a metaphor for what was to happen years later, when the real problem of sin needed the Son of God to hang on a Cross. Anyone who looked to Him would be saved. From then on the Cross turned

from a symbol of curse to the symbol of salvation and immeasurable love. A sign of hope amidst the deep despair and pain of this broken world.

However, we might run the risk of reducing the Cross to a mere symbol if we have not learnt to recognize our own crosses. What are the crosses that we encounter in our lives? It goes without saying that we all have crosses and no one goes through life without having to carry her own cross. But to celebrate the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, is to live that exaltation in our daily lives. Recently I heard a very famous priest preacher say something that startled me, “Have you ever asked God’s forgiveness for wasting the many sufferings God allowed in your life by fretting, complaining or distracting yourself?” He went on to say, “it is only through your sufferings joined with the suffering of Christ that you really bring any positive change in the world.” St. Alphonsa would say, ‘A day without suffering is a day wasted’. Think about it, we would naturally not want suffering and may be in our prayers subconsciously wish the same. But is that what it means to be brides of the Suffering One, we who are called to “rejoice in our sufferings” (Rom 5:3-4)?

Our beloved Foundress **Mother Veronica** was attracted to the Passion of Jesus and chose for herself the name Veronica of the Passion. She found great value in suffering, she writes: “It is only lack of faith that makes us anxious and impatient during a long time of trial... for, if Our Lord even once had made the soul understand the value of the cross and sufferings, it would never let go the least chance.” Mother Veronica experienced the final purification in Bethlehem, when like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross, she felt abandoned by everyone, even by God. In her own words: “I live in continual suffering. I am always hard pressed, always surrounded by alarms, by terror of penances.... I am always under suspicion as one guilty of some hidden crime....” Again, “My God what anguish....

I saw myself outside the range of God’s grace... I dared not pray...tormented by a thousand thoughts... isolated from the community, not allowed to speak to anyone, what a life I led!” In this situation Patriarch advises her in the following words: “Bear everything with patience and in conformity with His holy Will, for it is with love that He does everything. Suffering is the gift par excellence, which He gives those whom He loves Consider it a singular privilege and the greatest grace that God can give a soul, as they make you resemble Jesus in His Passion where He deigns to endure all sorts of torments and calumnies.”

In the movie *The Passion of The Christ*, when Jesus falls under the weight of the cross on the way to Calvary, He picks up his cross and kisses it tenderly (!) and says, “I am your servant, Father”. The disgust and perplexity of the co-convict who shouts, ‘You fool, why are you embracing your cross?’, voices the very difficulty that we have with the cross too. So, how can we exalt the Cross in our lives?

Fr James Martin SJ in his celebrated book **Jesus – A pilgrimage** gives us certain dispositions that we should have while carrying the cross.

First, it means accepting that suffering is a part of our lives. We need not go looking for a cross. Life will bring crosses to us. It is only for us to accept it gracefully with both hands. Accepting our

cross and giving up our lives means that, at some point, we have to reconcile to the fact that frustration, disillusionment, sadness, calamities, sickness, injustice, pain and finally death are a part of our lives and they must ultimately be accepted without bitterness. If we live with the worldview that pain in our lives is something we need to reject and run away from, we will surely find ourselves bitter – bitter for not having accepted the cross.

Perhaps as Religious, we find it noble to accept the traditional crosses like sickness, humiliation, personal poverty because this is the stuff that saints were made of, and these are struggles that have been glorified over the years. But what about strained relationships within the community, or the cross of fighting against our will to accept the dictates of a superior, or the cross of knowing I might not be able to nurse an ailing parent, or the cross of being busy with meaningless work when we would much rather pray or even sleep or maybe the cross of not having work at all! This is in nowhere to say that sickness or humiliation are ‘easy’ but are we willing to recognize the crosses we carry silently- the ones that don’t look glorious or noble but ones we must embrace, even kiss daily.

What is the cross you are carrying right now?

Second, taking up our cross, we must be careful to make sure that we do not pass on our frustrations, our bitterness and pain to others around us. *Don’t carry the cross and give the bill to someone else.* It is only natural that we do not want to be alone in our suffering and have strong inclination to want others to suffer too while we are suffering. It is quite childish in one way but we do behave in ways which are highly immature in our sufferings. Fr. Martin however points out that this does not mean we cannot share our pain or suffering with others. The way to do it would be to share our pain with others while not making the person feel guilty for not having the suffering or trying to manipulate their freedom in subtle or not so subtle ways by accusations or whining self-pity. Jesus is our example here, he groaned in his agony under the crushing pain and trauma of his passion but we see no bitterness, scapegoating or self-pity. Carrying the cross as Jesus did gives permission for healthy sharing and even allowing a helping hand (Simon of Cyrene) but has no place for blame, self-pity or scapegoating.

How often do we come across elders in our community or parish who look down upon the young ones for not having enough ‘difficulty’ in their lives, or perhaps easier rules, milder penalties, longer sabbaticals and so we ‘create’ obstacles for them, are a little less patient with their flaws or simply write them off.

Are we sharing the pain of our crosses or looking for someone to blame?

Third, carrying the cross means that we must accept some other deaths before our physical death. Dying to find life according to Jesus is not firstly about physical death. There are a hundred other deaths we must embrace before the final one. The death of our plans, our dreams, our ideas, our security, our understanding, our joys, our loved ones, our self-respect (you can keep adding to the list). To exalt the cross in our lives means to constantly accept these deaths, name them, grieve them, let go and to receive new life and spirit from what has died. This is exactly what we proclaim at the very heart of every Eucharist – the paschal mystery. In this process we mature to be his disciples.

Make a list of your deaths. What are some of the deaths you have refused to die until now- some losses that you may have buried but not grieved, some desires you may have stifled but have not let go of?

Fourth, it means that we must wait for the resurrection. What it means is clearly not very clear. That is part of the journey that we wait with hope inside of our pains, frustrations, misunderstandings, injustice, humiliations, while always fighting the temptation to be bitter, knowing that there is a resurrection. While we may never know the when and how of the resurrection, what we do know is that it will happen. Beethoven, the Danish musical genius, composed his 9th symphony when he was almost deaf, but said almost nonchalantly, “I will hear it in heaven”. Now that is resurrection hope!

Fifth, carrying our cross daily means accepting that God’s greatest blessings do not come in the way we expect. God, since he is our Father and not a doting uncle, does answer our prayers, but, often times, by giving us what we really need rather than what we *think* we need. The Resurrection, says Fr. James Martin, does not come when we expect it and rarely fits our notion of how a resurrection should happen. To carry your cross is to be open to surprise!

Finally, taking up your cross means living in a faith that believes that nothing is impossible with God. As Fr. James Martin puts it, this means accepting that God is greater than our wildest imagination. Indeed, whenever we fall prey to the temptation that God cannot make a way out of our suffering into something beyond our human imaginations can take us, it is only because we have made God in our image and forgotten the fact that he cannot be put in a box. That really is living in the mystery of the Resurrection when we can live beyond the possibilities of our human imaginations.

Do we believe that God can bring about a resurrection from the crosses mentioned in the first disposition or the deaths listed in the third?

If we could inculcate and ask for the grace to live at least four of the six dispositions mentioned above we can truly say we have Exalted the Cross.

1. What the Exaltation of the Cross mean to you?
2. What is the one virtue you wish to grow in to carry your crosses more gracefully?