

GOOD FRIDAY 2023

Archbishop Fulton Sheen often shared a story of an experience that changed his life. It happened on a visit he was making to the Congo in the early 1970s. While there he was taken to a hospital that cared for those suffering from leprosy. He had gone to encourage them and to speak about Christ who is our hope.

As he was being shown around, he was already struggling with revulsion by the sights, smells and immense suffering. He knew what Jesus would have done but he was keenly aware what he wanted to do himself, which was to get through this experience as quickly as possible and reach a place where he felt more comfortable. Each person he was introduced to seemed to be more disfigured than the last. Towards the end of the visit he was taken into the ward where those being nursed towards end of their life were being cared for.

He came to the bed of a young man who had so many open, oozing sores; the sight and smell was overwhelming. Archbishop Sheen decided simply to give the man a blessing and then move on. He went closer to the bed and bent forward and as he did, the clasp holding his pectoral cross to the chain somehow came apart and the cross fell into the young man's open wound. Visibly shaken, Fulton Sheen took a few steps back in automatic reaction, followed quickly by an immediate conviction. Regaining his composure, he bent over, took his cross, out of the man's wound and fastened it once more to the chain. He said: *"I saw in a flesh the meaning of the Cross that I had preached about so many times – my pectoral cross had never fallen off before or nor since, it was a living word that Christ is our hope because he enters our wounds."*

The stark image of the cross entering the wounds of that young man is a homily in itself! A visual expression of what the liturgy of the Word has announced to us this afternoon: *'ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried...through his wounds we have been healed.'* The Letter to the Hebrews made clear that we have a high priest who is not incapable of feeling our weakness, hence we can approach him with confidence. The cry of Jesus at the end of his passion is a cry of exaltation and hope 'It is accomplished'.

But what is accomplished?

By the evening of that first Good Friday, it is not clear what the disciples understood about what had taken place, except that the one that they had confidently hoped was the Messiah, the one they had followed around Galilee for three years seeing people healed, lives changed and even a dead friend raised was now himself dead. What was clear, is that nobody in their right mind thought that they had just witnessed a hero's death. No one was shouting 'victory' or planning a celebration.

Only after the resurrection were they able to slowly begin to see that something had happened that afternoon, something that had changed the world forever, something that meant that life was different. Indeed, they came to believe that this terrible spectacle that was intended by the Romans to put fear into those who looked on the crucified, that this barbaric torture had opened a new shocking window onto who God was and just how much we were of value as human beings. With this obscene event the one true God had dramatically brought his plan to completion. In short, they saw the cross as an explosion of hope.

In truth God's revolution had already begun even before the creation of the world! In fact, I would like to suggest that the Cross makes no sense, literally is a nonsense, unless we go back to why God created at all. As you approach the cross in veneration today the first thought I would offer

to you is this: The mind-blowing truth is that you were in Jesus, even before you were in your mothers' womb! Your birth has less to do with your parents and everything to do with God who wanted you to exist. St Paul reminds of this:

⁶“yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Cor 8:6-7)

“He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.” (Eph 1:4)

¹⁵ “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶for in^[a] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in^[b] him all things hold together.” (Col 1:15-17).

So, when you approach the Cross you're approaching the one for whom you were created. The one who created the world so as to have a sacred space to place the creature that was to bear his image and likeness – the one who has a vocation to mirror His love in the world. The Trinity created you to participate in an eternal love affair. This was their plan for all eternity. Here is the truth you need to take to the cross: You were adopted in Jesus long before you were lost in Adam! You are made by love, with every potential to experience love.

In taking on Adam's skin, Jesus becomes the meeting place of heaven and earth. He assumes '*the poverty of our flesh*', as St Gregory of Nyssa writes that we '*may assume the richness of his Godhead*.' Jesus takes on our humanity so that he is able to see things through our eyes and to experience life through our flesh. This now allows him to meet us in every form of abuse, rejection, distress and despair. There is no aspect of our personal confusion and difficulty that is beyond his experience. He knows us from the inside. And there is no shame, betrayal, accusation, physical or emotional distress, there is nothing he has not endured or unable to understand. Listen to Pope Benedict in his message for the World Day of the Sick in 2011:

“Only a God who loves us to the extent of taking upon himself our wounds and our pain, especially innocent suffering, is worthy of faith.”

*St. Bernard observed: “God cannot suffer but He can suffer with. God, who is Truth and Love in person, wanted to suffer for us and with us; He became man so that He could suffer with man, in a real way, in flesh and blood. To every human suffering, therefore, there has entered One who shares suffering and endurance; in all suffering consolation is diffused, the consolation of God's participating love so as to make the star of hope rise.” (cf. Encyclical letter *Spe salvi*, n. 39).*

The Cross is God's 'yes' to mankind, the highest and most intense expression of his love and the source from which flows eternal life.

Here then is the second thought I would offer you as you approach the crucified Jesus this afternoon. The one whom you venerate is love that has suffered. A love that speaks from personal experience and has entered our darkness and touches our wounds with His wounds. This is what Archbishop Fulton Sheen experienced so dramatically and graphically revealed. The Cross is an invitation to participate in the mission of suffering and redeeming love. To stand with others in their suffering but to offer them, at the same time, the word of Hope. In Jesus all pain, all addiction, all doubts, all confusion, every wound finds the medicine of healing love.

Let me conclude with these words from Pope Francis at this week's General Audience. They bring together the two thoughts I have asked you to carry to Jesus crucified:

1. You were in Jesus long before you were lost in Adam. You find yourself in him. Participate in His life and you will walk in Hope.
2. There is nothing you experience that Jesus cannot understand. All healing arises through participation in the Cross, with him, through Him and for Him.

Now Pope Francis:

“And I invite each one of you to think: Where is your hope? Is your hope alive, or have you sealed it up? Where is your hope today?”

The cross displays the nails that pierce his hands and feet, his open side. But to the wounds in his body are added those of his soul. I ask myself: In what way does this help our hope?

We too are wounded – And there are often hidden wounds we hide out of embarrassment. Who does not bear the scars of past choices, of misunderstandings, of sorrows that remain inside and are difficult to overcome? But also, of wrongs suffered, sharp words, unmerciful judgements? God does not hide the wounds that pierced his body and soul, from our eyes. Think about your wounds, the ones you alone know about, that everyone has hidden in their heart. And look at the Lord and you will see, you will see how holes of light come out of those wounds. Jesus does not incriminate on the cross but loves. He loves and forgives those who hurt him (cf. Lk 23:34). Thus, he converts evil into good; thus, he converts and transforms sorrow into love.”

Abbot Robert

7 April 2023