

Palm Sunday 2022, abbey

When life gives us the cup of suffering, what do we do with it? This is what the passion story asks us. Do we reject and pour it out? Do we drink it angrily and spit in other people's faces (we know that some of us do this)? Do we simply shut down and refuse? What do *you* do with the cup of suffering?

Your cup is different from Jesus' cup, so you cannot exactly imitate him. But you can choose his style. He does not turn and run. However reluctant in the garden, he accepts the cup, then moves forward, step by step. Don't wait too long or you may be paralyzed. Rather, dare to think that your cup *can* bring blessing in some mysterious way.

There are many different kinds of suffering. Feeling misunderstood and unappreciated, being unjustly condemned. There may be thousands of important prison cases like this, but false accusation happens on lower levels too. There is physical pain, being crushed by the load, the penetration of sharp nails. There is the inner agony of feeling trapped and unable to breathe. The emotional deterioration of shame and belittlement. Perhaps worst is when friends forsake you, when they don't care enough to stand by. It is heroic to stand by someone who is down. It's a rare friend who will do so.

There is beauty below the surface of Jesus' suffering, as there might be under yours, if you look for it. Jesus looks and is empowered. The strongest force to be found on earth is love. This is true, though hate often looks stronger. There is always love to find. However distorted and toxic the outer situation, there is love available to you, always.

The women of Jerusalem extend their love. Weeping and lamenting; wiping Jesus brow with a cloth, treasuring the imprint of his suffering. The women receive Jesus' comfort, but he receives their comfort too. Tears and sorrow have positive value. They show what is ultimately important. Life is only as good as what we will weep for. If we do not grieve, our hearts are cold and dead.

Simon of Cyrene gives love. The man who carries Jesus cross when he cannot do so himself. As if Simon were *forced* to do it! He stepped up gladly. He was born for this moment. He isn't young; he has adult children, Rufus and Alexander according to another gospel. He is quiet, a workman; not Jewish—tradition gives him dark skin. ; Middle aged, he is physically virile, which is why the soldiers choose him. Only the lowly can carry the cross; only they find its hidden glory. Jesus spoke to the weeping women, but there are no words for Simon, who was so close he smelled the sweat.

When you keep vigil with someone, you get to a point beyond words. It is enough to be there. It is a privilege.

The centurion gives love, surprising himself for being out of character. He oversees the brutality and is used to it. It's his job. His wife and children, back in Rome, need the money. Perhaps he has elderly parents, making him sensitive to the aging mother below the cross. The centurion sees everything. It is his spear that makes the corpse bleed out. But the grim duty is not routine. Uncharacteristically he cries out. "This man was innocent! He was the Son of God!" His exclamation is the last direct quotation of the passion story. Once it is given, all that remains is for all to go home, beating their breasts.

We love to hear what Jesus says in the last moments. Why am I forsaken? I thirst. It is accomplished. But two statements are especially important. We find use for them in our quest to become human. "Forgive them; they simply don't know any better." So simple, so true. It usually takes us, ordinary mortals, a very long time to reach such detachment, to let compassion fill us, to let go of our injuries, to stop hating. When we do, it is a wonderful thing. We become incomprehensibly free.

The other statement goes to the man on the side. We pity the one on the other side. He he is bitter, wasting his last breaths, as we hope *not* to do. How terrible at the end to curse the darkness. Let's follow the wise one, who leaves his dishonesty behind. Listening to Jesus makes him gentle. He does not scold the cursing man. Rather he says, "Look at *him*. He is innocent. Try to find your own innocence right now." How wonderful to be growing in your very last moments. Becoming luminous and authentic.

The wise thief says, "Let's go out his way. I will if you will." How daring to *make* a friend in this terrible moment. To *be* a friend when you have nothing to give. To ask for what you need, to give all that you have. "Jesus, remember me." Think of the mountaintops and centuries in those words. He does not say, "Jesus, make this disappear. Jesus, magic me out of here." To be remembered is all he asks. Jesus affirms him. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Where that is, or what that is, or how long it will last—none of that matters. It is like the drowning victim going under for the third time and then feeling the lifeguard's grasp. To be with the friend we have chosen, that is paradise.

When life brings its worst, you will suffer but you may also find beauty. You will not be alone if you listen and ask. This is so even at the waters of death. For the man in the middle is taking you with him. He never forgets. He remembers forever. To be remembered in this special way—ah, that is paradise.