

30th Sunday of the Year

Year B

The Lord Who Works Marvels.

*We worship Christ who opens our eyes to see the marvels
that he has done for us as our high priest
and mediator with the Father.*

(Readings: Jeremiah 31: 7-9. Hebrews 5: 1-6. Mark 10: 46-52.)

When we think there might be something wrong with someone we know or, indeed, someone we love, we ask them, “What’s the matter?” A question that, at the very least, offers the person the opportunity to express in words, what, if anything, is wrong. That said, there are some people, in fact, sadly, rather too many in today’s world, whose suffering is so extreme, so physically or emotionally painful, that they simply cannot speak.

We have all seen, often very graphic, disturbing images of people, on our TV screens, and in our News Papers; people whose families have just been killed, or whose homes have been destroyed, or who have been left totally isolated in their suffering.

How many times have we seen images of such people sitting on the ground, their head in their hands, in complete dazed confusion, overwhelmed by their pain and their loss; their obvious suffering leaving them both numb and mute? And when we do witness that kind of extreme suffering, when we see the anguish on the faces of those distraught, pathetic figures, we feel somehow helpless. And it seems so futile, so senseless trying to say anything at all.

The first step towards overcoming this kind of suffering is to find a language that leads the sufferer out of his or her silence; a language for pain, and fear, and loss.

One of the great teachings of the biblical tradition is that people should express their suffering in lamentation, which is to say, the people shouldn’t repress their suffering in a brooding silence, since to remain silent, is to remain hopeless, because there is no belief, and so there is no relief, in the possibility of change.

It is not surprising, then, that there are so very many ‘prayers of lamentation’, offered up to God throughout the history of his people; lamentations which are at one time, cries of the heart, and shouts of suffering, groans of anguish, and screams for help. Though they are written on a bed of pain, they express the profound hope that, in time, things will change, that God will listen to his suffering people. Lamentation is, therefore, the ‘articulated sound’ of suffering, as the psalmist expresses so well:

Have mercy on me, Lord, I have no strength....
I am exhausted with my groaning;
every night I drench my pillow with tears;
I bedew my bed with weeping.
My eyes are wasted away with grief;
I have grown old surrounded by my foes. (Ps. 6)

The expression of one's suffering is intended to be more than mere 'self-expression'. It is made out of the genuine hope that things can change. Accordingly, lamentation is not pessimistic. It refuses to remain powerless and passive. And so, it expresses its longing for change. The prayer of lamentation makes an emotional, a spiritual bridge between silent endurance, and change. And that can be seen so vividly portrayed in today's Gospel.

Jesus is leaving Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd, probably pilgrims travelling to the holy city for Passover. When the blind beggar Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is so near, he shouts his own prayer of lamentation; "Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me."

Some of those following Jesus resent this unwelcome disturbance, so they tell this presumptuous upstart-of-a-beggar to keep quiet. He has been given no permission to scream out. He has been given no permission to find a language for his suffering.

Those who would have him keep his cries to himself, clearly represent the school of thought which is happy to leave the afflicted to suffer in silence, no doubt in the false belief that that is a right and proper response, a more religious response to suffering.

Without the capacity to communicate his suffering, Bartimaeus will remain in his lonely world of darkness. But he knows if there is going to be a change, he must communicate his loss to Jesus. And so, he screams his lamentation. And it is a scream which not only gets the attention of the people around him, but which also stops Jesus in his tracks, and prompts him to tell the crowd to minister to this blind man, by calling him over.

The crowd changes its tune: "Courage", they say, "Get up; he is calling you." Jesus asks the question; "What do you want me to do for you?" And when the blind man finds a language for his loss, Jesus heals him, and he compliments him for a faith that saves him. And so saved by faith, the restored beggar uses his new sight to follow Jesus along the road.

Now, the healing in the Gospel takes place as a result of the prayer of lamentation, a prayer that expresses the pain and the faith of Bartimaeus who, despite his physical blindness, perceived, and believed in a God who pays attention. And this must be so, for why would he bother screaming if he didn't believe there was someone there to pay attention? Bartimaeus focused firmly on Jesus, ignoring all other advice, advice that in his case was quite forceful. Even so, he gave his full, absolute attention to Jesus. And Jesus returned the compliment.

It occurs to me that if you have been brought up to believe that the right and proper response to suffering should be silent and passive, something to be borne with a stereotypically 'stiff upper lip', then you will probably find the prayer of lamentation to be altogether alien, something of a radical, even subversive act.

But I would argue that, to ignore or disdain such a powerful prayer is to forego the most articulate language we have for our suffering. Moreover, I believe it is to lose a faith that yearns to speak most honestly, and most powerfully to the very heart of God.

When Jesus reaches the end of his road; when he is at his most desperate in a garden in Gethsemane, he too, will use the prayer of lamentation. There, with blood-like sweat falling on the ground, Jesus finds the language for his own pain, and for his own fear, and for his own loss. The 'Good News' for us is that, as the Father heard Jesus' prayer; his powerful 'lamentation', so he hears ours, and just as powerfully.