

Christ, Mirror of our Weakness

The liturgy of Good Friday places us directly before the great mystery of Christ's Cross.

In the Gospel we contemplate our Lord in Gethsemane, being taken prisoner by a group of soldiers led by Judas. We see Him led before the High Priest Caiaphas, where He is interrogated and then struck unjustly in the face.

Later, in the presence of Pilate, the people shout, "Crucify him, crucify him!" (*Jn 19:6*). Following that, Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns.

On Good Friday morning, Pilate presents Christ, tortured and humiliated, to the people. He says, "*Ecce Homo* – behold the man" (*Jn 19:5*). A few hours later He will be crucified.

In a famous painting by Titian, the *Ecce Homo*, we see Jesus reduced to ruin as a man, but with his divinity and beauty shining through. God has chosen to make Himself visible even in his vulnerability.

In the pain and perhaps inner darkness of so many people who are suffering in the world (now also because of the coronavirus pandemic), we can contemplate Christ, scourged and crowned with thorns. Saint John Paul II saw Him like this: "It is man, every man, every man in his unique, unrepeatable being, created and redeemed by God... *Ecce homo!*"

It is true that we suffer together, as so many proofs of solidarity show us clearly now. But, in the final analysis, each person experiences suffering alone with God.

Jesus' solitude as He is shown to the people makes us think of the sick people who, because of current isolation measures, die without being able to say farewell to their families. It makes us think as well of others who are ill and suffering alone. Jesus, standing before the people, also tasted loneliness. His cry on the Cross – "Why have you abandoned me?" – perhaps began earlier, in his serene silence at the *Ecce Homo*.

The figure of Christ presented to the people by Pilate is also an icon of mistreated human dignity. There is a mysterious presence of God in every person's suffering – in the innocent who suffer because of natural disasters or human injustice, but even when our sufferings are caused by ourselves, mainly by our sins. We ask God to help us, to save us. He has taken on himself all the consequences of people's sins. He is our hope.

Jesus, wounded and humble, is also like a mirror in which we see ourselves. The God who is love shows Himself in the wounds of the suffering Christ.

A special presence of God is also found in those who give themselves to others disinterestedly, because “where there is charity and love, there God is present. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est!*” We have seen so many people who are acting as Good Samaritans, figures of Jesus, in hospitals, old people’s homes, and families. We have seen so clearly that individualism and what is merely useful do not have the last word. In a seemingly self-sufficient society, the Spirit of God is hidden in many people’s hearts. In one way or another, God always makes his presence felt in history and makes it fruitful again with love.

The figure of the *Ecce Homo* can also help us to realize more clearly how weak and oftentimes defenceless we are when facing many situations, as the Pope reminded us from an empty Saint Peter’s Square. There he spoke to us about the storm that reveals our fragility. Recognising this truth about ourselves can help us to reconfigure our relationship with God and other people.

The Gospel goes on to tell us how Jesus carries his Cross, is stripped of his garments, and, apparently, of his dignity too. At the moment of the crucifixion, our Lord cries out with words from one of the Psalms, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (*Mt 27:46*).

Why all this suffering? Why the Cross?

Although we cannot understand it completely, the Crucifixion reveals to us that right where there seems to be nothing but weakness, God shows his limitless power. Where we see failure, defeat, incomprehension and hatred, precisely there Jesus reveals to us God’s great power, the power that transforms the Cross into an expression of love and victory.

In the *Letter to the Hebrews*, we read that on the wood of the Cross we find “the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy” (*Heb 4:16*).

That was the experience of one of the condemned men crucified beside Christ on Calvary. The “Good Thief” experiences how the Cross of Jesus becomes the place where he sees that he is forgiven and loved: “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” our Lord tells him (*Lk 23:43*). There, on the Cross, we hear the word “Paradise” spoken.

Cross and Paradise. From being an instrument of torture, violence and disgrace, the Cross is transformed into a means of salvation, a symbol of hope. It has become a sign of God’s infinite, merciful love. Saint Josemaría tells us that on the way of the Cross we see how Christ “gives himself up to death with the full freedom of Love.” To look at the Crucified One is to contemplate our hope.

We too can contemplate this truth, by taking a crucifix in our hands and simply looking at our Lord. In one of his homilies, Pope Francis said: “Jesus’ eyes are not closed but open,

wide open: He looks at us in a way that touches our hearts. The Cross does not speak to us about defeat and failure; paradoxically, it speaks to us about a death which is life, a death which gives life, for it speaks to us of love, the Love of God incarnate, a Love which does not die, but triumphs over evil and death. When we let the crucified Jesus look upon us, we are re-created, we become ‘a new creation.’”

How much hope it can give us to look at the Crucifix in these times! It may be the Crucifix we have in our room or another place at home. We can pause silently and show Him our inner wounds, our tiredness, our worries, and put them in his hands.

Then we will experience the transforming power of the Love of God, who on the Cross embraces what is weak and fills us with hope. And we too will become a clear sign of God’s love in our families, for our friends, in all our surroundings. In each of these settings we can be a clear sign of hope, if we unite ourselves to Jesus on the Cross and with Him open our arms wide to other people.

On Good Friday let us give thanks in a special way for God’s mercy that reaches us through the Sacrament of Penance. Now, in this time of increased prayer and penance that is Lent and Holy Week, many people around the world are not able to get to Confession.

In this very unusual situation, the Pope advised us a few days ago to put into practice what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says about acts of contrition.¹ “If you can’t find a priest to hear your confession, speak to God, who is your Father, and tell him the truth: ‘Lord, I have done this, and this, and this... I’m sorry,’ and ask him for forgiveness with all your heart, with an act of sorrow, and promise him, ‘I’ll go to confession afterwards, but forgive me now.’”

On Good Friday the Church directs her attention to the *Lignum Crucis*, the tree of the Cross. In the liturgy we pray: “We adore your Cross, O Lord, and we praise and glorify your holy Resurrection. Because by this sacred wood, joy has come into the whole world.”

The Cross fills the whole world with hope. There we see our Lord with his arms wide open, ready to receive and heal our weaknesses. And there we also see the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Titian, after painting the *Ecce Homo*, painted the “Mater Dolorosa with Open Hands.” For many years, the two paintings hung side by side on the same wall. When suffering enters our lives, we will also realize, as we look at Jesus, that we are always accompanied by Mary. We ask our Lady to help us stay close to the Cross, in order to offer hope to those around us.

¹ Nos. 1451 and 1452.