

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Lent 2018

After the student massacre in Florida last week there appeared a very moving photograph in an American newspaper. It was of a mother of one of the students. She was totally distraught, her grief revealed on her face. No words could express her loss. She was embracing another teenager also weeping. On the woman's forehead there was a black cross of ashes. It happened on Ash Wednesday. She has just come from an Ash Wednesday Mass to the place of the death of her child.

We often hear it said on such occasions as always, "Where is your God who let this happen?" The believer reacts differently. We do come from dust and must return to dust as the cross of ashes proclaim. But the cross on the mother's forehead proclaims that into the hell of that woman's life Christ comes. As we say in the creed, "He descended into hell."

Seeing that cross of ash on her face it struck me first of all that there does exist a deep bond within the Body of Christ. We all share in the suffering and pain that is the human lot in one way or another. But we also can say we make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ as St Paul said: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Colossians 1:24). So the Christian does not just endure the unavoidable suffering and pain that comes our way. We can do something with it. It can be redemptive. It can release great graces of compassion and energy for justice.

And today we read the great story today about Abraham and his son Isaac. Abraham is told by God apparently to sacrifice his son on a mountain. Again, many see here evidence of a very cruel God who is asking Abraham to do such a thing. But as we are told it was a test of Abraham's faith. Literal interpretations are always misleading attractive as they might be. Child sacrifice seems to have been a practice known to the Hebrews either amongst themselves or their neighbouring tribes. Not that we can claim higher moral ground in the use and abuse and slavery of minors in our enlightened world. As the story unfolds God holds Abraham's hand and Abraham sacrifices an animal instead.

It is a story not of a cruel God. But a story of how the Hebrew people through Abraham had revealed to them that this God is a God who wants mercy not sacrifice. An often repeated refrain in the scriptures. That is one of the startling revelations of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is a revolutionary change from the ways of some religions. This is a tradition that does not want to manipulate God or attempt to appease an angry god. Of course, throughout history we have often forgotten that truth, Nevertheless, in humility we can turn again and we stand in wonder before the goodness of God. This is a God whose ways cannot be understood in any human way.

Onto another mountain Jesus takes Peter, James and John where they could be alone. A time and place for prayer. Mountains are a privileged place for communing with God in many traditions. There on the mountain the conversation is between Jesus, Elijah and Moses, with the disciples looking on in fear and wonder. The vision affirms that Jesus lives and teaches in the same tradition of faith as they. A cloud comes over the scene and they hear only the voice from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him". Clouds, too, are an indication in ancient times of the presence of the divine. But a cloud of unknowing. We cannot penetrate with clear sight into the cloud. God cannot be penetrated or understood. God remains an unfathomable mystery. The more we seek the more we may find, that is the mystery.

Like Jesus and the disciples we need to go up a mountain, a place where we can be alone. We can even share the experience with others standing before the silence of God just like the disciples. We can both pray unceasingly in words and also remain silent before that mystery shown to us. Like them we can be encouraged and strengthened to take up the daily crosses of life. Jesus wants to lead us into God. We only need to listen to him And his way is only by way of the cross.

So Jesus is revealed as divine Son of God. But Son of God who chooses to enter into our lives and our world. Jesus descends from the mountain of intimacy with the Father into the world we inhabit. In Jesus God and all humanity are united. All this is summed up neatly by St Paul to the Romans today. Jesus, the beloved Son, died and rose and pleads for us at God's right hand. Or more graphically by the sign of the cross on a grieving mothers forehead.

Fr Graham