

Sacred Heart Novena *Gardiner Street (8)*

A trusting heart

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Introduction

A warm welcome to all as we continue our nine days' prayer for tomorrow's feast. This evening and tomorrow evening are different: Thursday is devoted to the cross and Friday is devoted to the resurrection.

Because of C-19, this year we were unable to gather as a body to mark the great events that give us new life in Christ. In a sense, each of us had to make our own Good Friday and our own Easter Vigil. Of course we missed being together, but it is not at all all negative. Because nothing was "put on" for us, we were obliged to celebrate spiritually and interiorly. As Good Friday came, we all had to ask ourselves, what does this day mean to me? As Easter Sunday came, we all had to ask ourselves, what does this day mean to me?

Topic

It may even have led to a better experience because we were obliged to ask ourselves what we believe happened for us on the first Good Friday and what we believe happened for us on the first Easter Sunday.

Arguments

1. Depending a bit on your age, all of us received a particular way of looking at redemption. I want to describe this very briefly but I hope clearly and in a fair way.

On the cross, God was punishing Jesus for the sin of Adam and all subsequent sins. Jesus paid the price of our redemption for us.

You can see this in popular hymns. In the Catholic tradition, we have a hymn called "I'll sing a hymn to Mary." The second verse contains these words: "Remind thy Son that He has paid the price of our iniquity." Or in the beautiful and ever popular evangelical hymn "O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder", we eventually come to this phrase: "that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin." The tradition as received presents insurmountable difficulties for us today. Does such a punishing God really exist? Did Jesus himself ever talk about his destiny in this way? In the light of evolution, can we really say it all goes back to one human being, a real historical Adam? And so on.

The tradition is strong, especially in worship. Nevertheless, most of us have walked away from it consciously or unconsciously. It does leave us with a challenge: if not that, then how do we understand the great events that gave us new life in Christ?

2. There is a very attractive alternative in St Paul. Of course, Paul knows that Jesus was put to death and even died for love of us. But St Paul does not understand the cross as a punishment from God but instead as the expression of God's compassionate solidarity with broken humanity. In the teaching of St Paul, Jesus' own faithfulness to his mission and to his identity did indeed lead to the cross. But at the same time, that very same faithfulness to his God and to himself disclosed God's loving faithfulness to us all. A passage from Romans captures it all. In Romans 3, we read in part:

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God ...has been disclosed—namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. ...God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. (Romans 3:21-25 NET translation)

In a word, his death was not a punishment to offset God's just anger but the exact opposite: the disclosure of God's love and mercy, of God's compassionate solidarity. The faithfulness of Jesus shows us the faithfulness of God. The love of Jesus shows us the love of God. As St Paul says elsewhere,

...the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Love is the key, not only St Paul but also in John's Gospel and the letter to the Hebrews.

3. This alternative, older way of looking at the cross is also found in the Luke's Gospel. The death of Jesus in this Gospel is not a punishment but a prayer, a profound prayer of trust, taken from Psalm 31 verse 5: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

The full verse is worth paying attention to:

Into your hand I entrust my life; you will rescue me, O LORD, the faithful God.
(Psalm 31:5)

As we saw, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is shown at prayer twice as frequently as in Mark or Matthew. Even his death is a prayer, his final act of trust in his loving God, in his "Abba, Father." This is very different to the tradition we have received and, in my opinion, far more life-giving. Jesus is faithful to God and God is faithful to Jesus and through him to us all.

Conclusion

Poetry can do all this much better, so I would like to close with a verse from Samuel Crossman's "My song is love unknown"

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.

Because this is how things are, we make our own the prayer of the Good Thief: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Because this is how things are, we make our own the prayer of the Stephen: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Because this is how things are, we may pray the novena prayer: "O Sacred Heart of Jesus, in place all my trust in you." Amen.