

"My Soul Is Troubled"

Homily of April 6, 2003

by Fr. Brian Timoney

I'm going to follow the words of Jesus in today's gospel, and make them my own. "My soul is troubled now." It is troubled by worldwide terrorism, by the more than three million deaths in ongoing wars in central Africa. It is troubled by starvation in Ethiopia, by children in dire poverty here in our own country. And it is deeply troubled by the war in Iraq. I feel what an Irish writer has described as "a pain of deep anxiety that cannot find coherent expression.

And my soul has long been troubled by the very concept of a God Who suffers, by the very concept of the redemptive power of suffering. "If the grain of wheat dies, it produces much fruit." Is it not strange, is it not almost perverse that the cross has become the accepted symbol of Christianity? After all, it was an instrument of execution. All Christians honor the cross. We Catholics hang a battered and broken body on it. We place it in our churches. We hang it in our classrooms, in our homes. We even hang it around our necks. Does making it from gold and precious stones as a piece of jewelry somehow sanitize it, make it more acceptable than the ugly reality that it was? What are we saying when we honor the cross... that suffering is good? No. That suffering has value? Yes. As the gospel says, the one who loves life loses it, while the one who hates life in this world preserves it to life eternal.

Does suffering have value? Is suffering redemptive? I must confess that I find it very, very hard to speak about this in any personal way, because I guess the most physical pain that I have experienced has been a bad toothache. I have NO concept of the excruciating pain of, let us say, bone cancer or crippling arthritis, or the agony of a parent watching a child just wasting away. It is more than probable that my day will come, perhaps much sooner than I would want. And what is troubling my soul now is "How will I deal with it?" Will I then see it as having value? Will I then see it as redemptive, as life-giving? I just don't know.... I just don't know.

How was it for Jesus? How was His pain and death life-giving and redemptive for us? Well, we have to remember that the sin of our first parents was a double one. It was first of all, a sin of pride and ambition, and then a sin of disobedience. It was a sin of pride and ambition because they were told that eating the forbidden fruit would make them like gods, and they wanted that. And it was a sin of disobedience because they went ahead and ate the forbidden fruit. In contrast to that, Jesus accepted His humanity, accepted that pain and disease and death were part of the human condition. And Jesus, Son of God, did not stand outside of humanity. He was and is one with us, in our brokenness. As St. Paul wrote to the Phillipians, "He emptied Himself..." (What an expression!)... "He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the

likeness of men. Even more than the acceptance of His humanity was his acceptance of torture and death, that was motivated by His total acceptance of His role in the whole history of salvation. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup of suffering pass from me; yet, not my will but thine be done."

Jesus knew that his preaching of a new way of relating to God would inevitably lead to His death. And, yet, he persisted in His preaching. He remained faithful to His call, remained faithful to His mission. And this is His redemptive act, a total obedience, a total acceptance of His lifelong mission, even in the face of death. And this, of course, was in sharp contrast to the refusal to live by God's law that had originally brought evil into the world. This is our theology. This is our understanding of the redemptive power of suffering. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But, if it dies, it produces much fruit."

We are called to accept the fragility, the weakness, and the limitations of our humanity. And we are called to be faithful to our Christian mission, which is to make Christ present in our world...not only the Christ Who healed, not only the Christ Who embraced little children and blessed them, but also the Christ Who, in the face of unspeakable torture and death, could say, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup of suffering pass from Me. Yet, not my will but thine be done." It would be a great grace for you, for me, if we too could say that prayer. So, let us today and always uphold one another in prayer, uphold especially all the members of our parish who, this day, are suffering in mind and body and spirit, because we cannot face suffering alone. We cannot understand suffering alone. We cannot be Christians alone. Amen.