



The Agony of the Cross

Not so long ago we were confronted with the most disturbing story that 24 Afghan children had been found living in filthy conditions in the sewer system under a Rome railway station. The children, ranging from 10 to 15, were unaccompanied and some were in poor physical condition. They slept under cartons or dirty blankets in a hiding place not far from Rome's Colosseum. The news came on the same day as a container filled with people seeking to escape Afghanistan was discovered on the Afghani-Pakistan border. Over half the people in the container were already dead.

The suffering inherent in such stories is overwhelming. Particularly horrific, and by the sheer shock of them, such stories bring home to us more generally, the agony that seems to rise incessantly from the world.

Of course, we do not need to look so far away for the experience of agony. People live in agony much closer to home. Agony greets us - if we look - in those parts of our own country in which the fog of hopelessness suffocates whole communities of indigenous people. It is there for us to hear in our own neighbourhood where people live lives of quiet desperation through the agony of loneliness, depression or tormenting physical and emotional pain.

If we admit it, we, ourselves, too know a certain agony within our own experience:

Have we ever been silent although we wished to defend ourselves, although we were treated with less than justice? Did we ever forgive although we got no thanks for it and our silent pardon was taken for granted? . . . Have we ever made a sacrifice without thanks, acknowledgement or even sentiments of inner peace? Have we ever been thoroughly lonely? Have we had to take a decision purely on the verdict of our conscience, when we cannot tell anybody or explain to anybody, when we are quite alone and know we are making a decision no one can make for us and for which we shall be responsible to eternity? ¹. . .

We hold the agony of our own hearts. We hold our agony in the same way as Mary held the dead, lifeless body of Jesus taken from the Cross. We see that dead, abandoned body of Jesus in the world's agony now. We see the body of the crucified One in those whom the world has abandoned, in those parts of our own heart that are broken. We hold the body of the Crucified One when we hold the agony of those who are now crucified by the world's greed, by the world's neglect.

We hold the Crucified One.

¹ Karl Rahner, "The Possibility and Necessity of Prayer," in *Christian at the Crossroads*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), 60-61.

With anxious, helpless ardour, like Mary the Mother of Jesus who holds her dead son in agony, we gaze towards heaven, our hearts full of question. One of my favourite writers expresses this experience in this way,

I will describe it tentatively here as a mysticism of suffering unto God. It is found particularly in Israel's prayer traditions: in the Psalms, in Job, in Lamentations, and last but not least in many passages in the prophetic books, [and from the Cross of Jesus itself]. This language [is] . . . a language of crisis, a language of affliction and of radical danger, a language of complaint and grieving, a language of crying out . . . The language of this God-mysticism is not first and foremost one of consoling answers for the suffering one is experiencing, but rather much more a language of passionate questions from the midst of suffering, questions turned toward God, full of highly charged expectation . . . What occurs in this language is not the repression but rather the acceptance of fear, mourning and pain; it is deeply rooted in the figure of the night, the experience of the soul's demise. It is less a song of the soul, more a loud crying out from the depths – and not a vague, undirected wailing, but a focused crying-out-to.²

As we hold the agony of others and as we hold our own agony, we are full of question. And no answer comes. As for Mary as she held her dead Son, as for us, there is only Silence and our pain is felt only more.

Yet now, as on that first Good Friday, the Silence calls forth a depth of hope we barely imagined possible and our hope fills the Silence. It is our hope that fills the Silence. On this day we hold the world's agony but we also allow hope to rise in our hearts. We cannot avoid the question that it might be a hope in vain. In the face of what agony we encounter and that we bear, our hope is not given an easy, facile answer or consolation. We must wait in our hope.

Yet, in our waiting a word comes to us. It is the word of memory – the memory that one man's hope was not disappointed. In our own hope we remember the heart of hope that was in Jesus himself, a hope that rose in the Silence, and not without its waiting, was given its answer. In the story of Jesus' own agony, in the story of his own hope, we are ultimately reminded that our hope is not in vain.

For in the story of Jesus our hope has been given a Promise. Our hope is not in vain. And this promise received in the event of Christ's Resurrection is the Promise that opens up for us new possibility even in the midst of what might be extraordinary limitation. The promise we have been given, and the hope that springs ever new from this faith, enables us to celebrate even in the face of frustration, distortion or limitation. Thus our agony is not the tomb in which we are consigned to remain trapped forever and in which we must despair. In Christ, even in the midst of the world's agony, our hope becomes the avenue into an unimagined possibility.

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² Johannes Metz, *A Passion of God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, translated by J. Matthew Ashley, (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1998), 66-69.