

Pentecost 3 2024 All Souls **PERSONAL TRIAL** dtw

2 Cor 4.16-17 *So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.*

Everyone has fears and doubts and pain. Fear of failure or the unfamiliar or challenge or change; fear, perhaps of our 'shadow side'... Doubts about our real ability or worth or the future... Pain of disappointment or loss. Much of this we keep secretly to ourselves. Some is known only to our closest companions. Some we find hard to own up to. Some we find hard to face or confront.

The cross of Christ informs this paradox. John O'Donohue in his book *Eternal Echoes* suggests that lyrically, there is a cruciform structure to every pain, difficulty and sadness. In this sense, the Cross is not an external object that belongs far away on a hill in Jerusalem. Rather the shape of the Cross is internal to the human heart. Our lives are full of contradictions and conflicts, which often criss-cross. Some of our most important learning experiences are at crossroads. To view the Cross is to see how it embraces all directions. The vertical beam reaches from the lowest depth of clay to the highest peak of eternity; the horizontal beam stretches the breadth of the world. The promise to each of us is that we will never be called to walk the lonely path of suffering without seeing the footprints ahead of us which will lead eventually over the brow of the hill where resurrection sunlight shines.

The marks and wounds that suffering leaves on us eventually become places of beauty. Weakness and failure do not come easy to us. Yet failure is often the place where suffering has left the most precious gifts. One of O'Donohue's stories makes me recall a woman who was celebrating her 60th birthday. She remarked how this milestone had made her reflect deeply on her life. She was surprised and excited on looking back at her life to discover that much of what she had understood as the successes in her life did not hold their substance under more critical reflection. As against that, what she had always termed her failures now began to seem ever more interesting and substantial. The places of failure had been the real points of change and growth. A major setback in her career path miraculously gave her back the family that she had lost to her aspirations. If this had not happened her grown-up children would have left home without her really knowing them or them knowing her.

Most of us are familiar with the saying, "When one door closes, another opens". I have often found the truth of that saying in sickness and disappointment. In our fumbling humanness, it has been my experience that God permits things to occur which may plunge us into darkness, unease and sometimes a deep sense of loss. It might be the loss of pride, loss of dignity or bodily function. It might be the loss of purpose in life, unemployment, or perhaps the death of a loved one. Associated feelings of blame and guilt can also lie close.

But often, in my experience too, and when I am least expecting it, an aspect of the gospel presents itself to me in which I sense movement, encouragement and hope. Gently, from deep inside, where we can feel parched from the anguish, we can become aware of the presence of Christ loving us back from death to life again. God is revealed to us perhaps through Scripture or a person or a chance event or while we just stay with the pain. And then it lifts and we can find ourselves rejoicing in a new and deepening sense of being and belonging. We have been 'brought home'. We might reflect in wonder at how what was once a barrier has paradoxically become a bridge, our own cross which we have taken up through to a personal resurrection. But first it seems that we, like the Christ we follow, have to be prepared to lose everything.

There is a beautiful verse from Antonio Machado:

*Last night I dreamed
-blessed illusion-
that I had a beehive*

*here in my heart
and that the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures*

Today we have these poignant words of St Paul: *So we do not lose heart,.,this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.*

Much of our human fear is to do with trying to *hold on*. We accumulate, fill diaries, being driven rather than drawn. There is freedom and liberation in losing. When we come to the place of the skull, paradoxically we come also to the shore of resurrection where our answers are never black and white, not clean-cut, but disturbed by the fullness of divine yearning and mysterious grace. How arresting, how sobering is the account right at the end of John's Gospel of the disciples who simply went fishing, business-as-usual, and caught nothing – failed again, so it seems - until Jesus turns up. The net nearly bursts!

Someone who has suffered long from the condition known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome wrote a prayer based on such a John 21 encounter:

Lord, break open the nets of my despair. Draw up from the depths of my being the abundance of life that is within me. Come to me in my bone-tired weariness and despair. Take me back over the deeps where I have found no life and bid me act again. Show me how to hope.

When I find myself despairing, let me know your presence. When I feel that I am at the end of my strength, when there is no point in trying any longer, let me hear your voice. When life seems empty and I begin to doubt myself, give me the gift of hope. Let me act for life and for living in the face of its absence.

Remind me that even one small action for life is an act of hope. Each of these small acts gathers vitality in those places where I have found only emptiness.

When you call me let me answer, sure in the knowledge that you wish to draw a catch in the deeps of my life. You wish to feed the hungry and hope is a catch to be shared. Give me the courage to share my hope with others.

Lord, stand in the empty nets of my life. You are my hope. When we are done, I know you will leave me standing waist-deep in glistening, silver-flashing, teeming life.

(Michael Hansen SJ. *The Land of Walking Trees*. Collins Dove 1993.)