

Authentic Freedom Comes from Accepting the Cross

September 14, 2014

Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross
Readings: Numbers 21.4b-9;
Philippians 2.6-11;
John 3.13-17**By Mathew Ramage**

While pastors and theologians know well that the Church has carefully selected the readings for her liturgical feasts throughout the year, regrettably the faithful are often unaware of this fact unless it is addressed explicitly in the homily. Fortunately, it is not difficult to demonstrate the coherence of the various readings provided for our meditation on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This brief reflection will consider just two of these texts, one of which is particularly easy to neglect since it is the responsorial psalm.

In the first reading, with their patience worn out from wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel complain against God and Moses. Freed from the yoke of slavery, the people now yearn to return to the creature comforts they once enjoyed in Egypt. However fleeting the pleasures of Egypt might have been, for the people of Israel it was easier to tolerate the hardships of Egypt than to live day by day on divine providence in the Sinai desert.

Notice the internal contradiction in the people's complaint in this reading. On the one hand, they claim that "there is no food or water" in the desert. On the other hand, they rant, "We are disgusted with this wretched food!" It is not as if there had been no food. God provided manna and quails (Num 11), as well as water (Num 20). The real issue here has to do with the question of how Israel was going to respond to her sufferings in the desert.

Bearing Hardships and Renewing Trust

The experience of the ancient Israelites has much to teach us today about how to bear hardships and renew our trust in God each day. For Fathers of the Church such as Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the Israelites' slavery in Egypt represents man's slavery to sin, and their crossing the Red Sea in the Exodus is a figure of the death to our old selves and the renewal we experience in the waters of baptism. Thus the Israelites' desire to return to Egypt can be seen as an image of our own desire to return to our past sins, to "undo" our baptism and revert to a life of "practical atheism" in which Christ and his cross play no role in our daily lives. How many of us live the majority of the week in the absence of an intentional relationship with God!

The mass's responsorial psalm, Psalm 78, reflects upon the very same scene narrated in the first reading. What we hear proclaimed in the responsorial psalm is only a fraction of the entire biblical text. This psalm recounts the back-and-forth interplay of God's goodness and Israel's ingratitude throughout salvation history. God performs a miracle and parts the Red Sea; Israel rebels. God has compassion; the people test him again and again. The key to getting out of this rut of ingratitude lies in the psalm's refrain, "Do not forget the works of the Lord!" To remember in thankfulness the many ways God has been there for us in the past: this is the sound spiritual advice the psalm is offering us. By developing a "biblical memory" of God's past saving deeds in our own lives, we learn to accept difficulties with more trust and with the conviction that God will bring good from them just as he brought good from the sufferings of his people of old.

One of the most interesting – and perhaps troubling – parts of this psalm is that God slays his people, who then seek him again. God allows his people to suffer in the wilderness in order that they might grow in their desire for union with him. This teaching also appears in the Fathers of the Church, in meditations on the Song of Songs. The bridegroom of the Song of Songs periodically hides himself from his bride in order to increase her yearning for him. In the pedagogy of the cross, God sometimes hides himself from us today as well, whether through a physical ailment, the loss of a loved one, persistent dryness in prayer, or any number of other challenges life brings us. Yet if we cultivate the proper dispositions to receive these crosses from God, they can increase our capacity for God and increase our capacity to love as he loves. The crosses in our lives are therefore a mercy from God, who works through them to free us for authentic love.

Going Out of Oneself

The inextricable connection between the cross and authentic freedom is a message our society today desperately needs to hear. In his powerful essay “Why I Am Still in the Church,” Father Joseph Ratzinger touched the heart of the issue:

Only by suffering himself and by becoming free of the tyranny of egotism through suffering does man find himself, his truth, his joy, his happiness. We are deceived if we think that it is possible to become a human being without conquering oneself, without the patience of renunciation.

In his interview book *God and the World*, then-Cardinal Ratzinger likewise penned the following:

We know that the way of love – this exodus, this going out of oneself – is the true way by which man becomes human. . . . Anyone who has inwardly accepted suffering becomes more mature and more understanding of others. . . . Anyone who has constantly avoided suffering does not understand other people; he becomes hard and selfish.

Ratzinger’s choice of the word “exodus” in this text is far from coincidental. In biblical Greek, *exodus* literally means “the road out” and can be translated “departure.” It refers first of all to the Israelites’ departure from Egypt, but according to its spiritual sense it signifies a going out of ourselves and from our selfish ego to embrace others in love.

As Ratzinger observes, suffering is one of modern man’s greatest fears because it threatens our sense of freedom. If we personally do not have a say in every last outcome of our lives, we complain as the Israelites do in today’s first reading and psalm. We tell ourselves that if we did not freely choose a particular state of affairs in our lives, then we do not have to accept the situation and are not morally culpable for “following our hearts” rather than the “rules.”

This response can be seen, for instance, in the cases of a man who has been given the cross in the form of a homosexual inclination or a couple who are infertile. Our society tells the homosexual person that he ought to act upon this drive because he did not, after all, freely choose to be this way. The infertile couple likewise are told that they should go ahead and use *in vitro* fertilization (IVF). The Church teaches that and why IVF is wrong. Still, the thought process runs, we ought to have mercy upon the couple and tell them it’s okay to use IVF since they did not choose to be infertile.

How to Suffer Well

Preaching on topics like these in today’s secularized culture may not be easy, but truly it is a mercy to open up the treasures of the Catholic moral and spiritual tradition to those who are thirsting and starving for the truth perhaps without even knowing it. The truth is that infertility, homosexual inclinations, divorces, illnesses, and any number of other challenges Christians face are real *crosses* allowed by the Lord in order to sanctify those who bear them. No, the person may not have chosen the cross, but the reality is that it is there. Moreover, it is not a mercy to condone sin. Rather, the truly merciful and compassionate thing is to hold out the cross, gently but firmly, to those in pain. Indeed, how can a person emerge triumphant in the struggle with suffering and sin unless he consciously unites his sufferings to those of Christ on the cross?

One of the greatest spiritual treasures on this topic is this pithy teaching of SaintThérèse of Lisieux: “I decide to choose that which I have not chosen.” Commenting on this passage, the great spiritual master Father Jacques Philippe puts it well when he says, “Externally it doesn’t change anything about the situation, but interiorly it changes everything.” The key is not to avoid all suffering, but rather to learn how to suffer well, to change our interior state so as to reap the fruit of the seeds sown in the crosses God sends our way.

This does not mean, of course, that we should never try to eliminate suffering in our lives. The theology of the virtues, an element of the Catholic tradition often neglected in catechesis and preaching, wonderfully illumines this point. The virtue of fortitude, by which a person faces difficulties well, has two parts: attack and endurance. To be sure, we have to attack challenges in our lives and strive to overcome obstacles. For example, if we are sick and medicine can help us, we attack the disease to find healing. However, when it comes to things we cannot change, sometimes all we can do is endure them, taking up our cross daily and following Christ (Lk 9.23).

In his encyclical on hope, *Spe salvi*, Pope Benedict reminds us of the practice of offering up our sufferings. He notes that this discipline has fallen out of favor in our desacralized society, yet spiritually speaking it stands right at the heart of the gospel:

What does it mean to offer something up? Those who did so were convinced that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ’s great “com-passion” so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love.

In other words, by offering up our own sufferings, we become sharers in Christ’s passion and coredeemers with him. This is the true meaning of “com-passion”: literally to “suffer with” Christ so as to rise with him and join his work of renewing creation. As Saint Paul states, “The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and, if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8.16-17).

A human being is saved in no other way but through the cross. This means Jesus’ cross first and above all, but it also requires our participation in that same cross. As we pray to be made sharers in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity, we must not forget that the path to conformity to Christ is cruciform. To be like God, Joseph Ratzinger tells us, is to be like the triune God – which means to be like Christ crucified. The good news of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross lies in the realization that the moment we are crucified with Christ is the moment we most reflect his glory.

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, "The importance of Christology: The Theology of the Cross," available at:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8573>

Fernand Cabrol, "The True Cross," available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04529a.htm>

Rev. Steve Grunow, "Spirituality: Exaltation of the Holy Cross," available at:

<http://www.wordonfire.org/WoF-Blog/WoF-Blog/September-2011/Spirituality-Exaltation-of-the-Holy-Cross.aspx>

John Paul II, Homily on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14, 1987), available at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1987/documents/

"Pope Francis: Approach Mystery of the Cross with Prayer and Tears," available at:

<http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-approach-mystery-of-the-cross-with-pr>

"Pope's Preacher on the Exaltation of the Cross," available at:

<http://www.catholic.org/news/international/europe/story.php?id=29318>

IN SHORT . . .

- **Remembering God's past saving deeds in our own lives, we learn to accept difficulties with the conviction that he will bring good from them.**
- **Our crosses can lead to an increased capacity for God and an increased capacity to love as he loves.**
- **The crosses in our lives are therefore a mercy from God, who works through them to free us for authentic love.**
- **We might try to tell ourselves that if we didn't freely choose a particular state of affairs, then we don't have to accept it and aren't morally culpable for following our hearts rather than the rules.**
- **But it is not a mercy to condone sin. Rather, the truly merciful and compassionate thing to do is to hold out the cross, gently but firmly, to those in pain.**
- **How can a person emerge triumphant in the struggle with suffering and sin unless he consciously unites his sufferings to those of Christ on the cross?**