

Standing at the Foot of the Cross

Isaiah 50:4-7; Phillipians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47 (Palm Sunday)

April 9, 2006

During Holy Week and the Pascal Triduum we share many stories, many signs indicating that the Christian tradition took form by uniting itself to the history of concrete believers.

We embody this dynamic in our very reading of the Passion story, where we are brought by the Spirit to become disciples in our own right, learning, keeping silence, and being sent to comfort the broken.

All four Gospel accounts of the Passion echo and give shape to the experience of human suffering. Jesus' disciples discovered in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah the clues that gave meaning to the passion and death of their Lord. The lives of those first Christians, with all their contradictions, trials, and sufferings—the consequence of their chosen path—likewise found meaning in the figure of the Servant.

In each day's unfolding, human pain is like a teacher who shows her students how to listen to and heal their own wounds.

I have a friend in the migrant community who has not been able to move his body for three years, nor even scarcely to speak... one day he fell from a tree while he was picking apples on a local farm. Without savings, without health insurance, without his being able to work and with a small child in the house, the whole family's life changed.

After listening to the sober account Mark gives of the Passion in this Sunday's Gospel, we feel compelled to find sense in the suffering of the just. There is an eloquent connection between human pain, inexplicable as it may be, and the Passion of Jesus.

Suffering makes itself known in the rhythm of our lives, often surprising us... there is no preparing ourselves. Rather it seems that suffering itself prepares us for something we never suspected.

Henri Nouwen attempts to reveal the meaning of suffering in the believer's mission. In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen searches for a theological-mystical clue in the fact that the pain of others has a profound impact on the believer's own suffering. The disciple's life is distorted if she ignores the suffering of others, for she is a sufferer herself, if she will admit it. But in order to accept her own wounds, she must pass through her denial and enter a struggle plagued with insecurities. It is a humbling process, frightening at the start. But then she becomes truly able not only to heal herself but also to console and heal her sisters and brothers.

There is coherency in the disciple thus schooled. Normally the believer is confused by suffering and by the contradiction of the Cross, considering them totally outside God's project. This is why Mark, in his Passion account, tells of Judas' betrayal, of Peter's denial, of the flight of the disciples scandalized by the failure of Jesus on the cross. Mark is treating the believer with pedagogical strictness when he warns her that by choosing to follow the Lord—once she makes up her mind to do that—, she must immediately take for granted that she will have setbacks and that she will abandon the one who invites her to follow.

Those disciples are a mirror in which we see ourselves. In the passion of Jesus' followers, what counts isn't our courage, nor our rational calculation, but our hard-won recognition of ourselves as wounded... and our returning to the path.

My friend lies in a nursing home, unable to move, and his young wife clings to love and hope. She does not comprehend, she does not take flight, neither does she resign herself. She appears to bear the full weight of her husband's situation. She is like a member of that faithful group who stayed close to Jesus at the foot of the cross. She is like "Mary Magdalene. Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome." Later these women become the first bearers of the resurrection message.

Perhaps women's perception of suffering and of the cross is truer than men's. They confront suffering—they do not deny it. They dwell in it, and in this way they enable themselves to transform suffering into motivation for living.