

SOMETHING UNDERSTOOD

Prayer and suffering

By MARTIN ISRAEL

OUR GREAT work in this life is to become fully human. What that humanity might mean was shown in the life of Jesus Christ, whom we believe was the eternal Word of God made flesh. Through what he taught, what he was, and what he gave of himself to all the world we can be delivered from the slavery of sin to participate fully in the world as God's servants and children. To men is given the supreme quality of free will, the capacity to choose between alternative approaches to life and to act accordingly. As Psalm 82, verse 5, puts it, 'I once said: You too are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you'. To be a god means to be a centre of independent will, to be able to choose a destiny that may have cosmic proportions. Jesus quotes this passage in defending his claim to be God, saying that the word God is used by the Law of those to whom the word of God was addressed (Jn 10,34-35). Psalm 82, however, continues, 'But all the same, you shall die like other men; as one man, princes, you shall fall'. The psalmist inveighs against corrupt judges and rulers who are warned of the consequences of their sinful actions even though they assert temporary power. The difference between the godhead of Jesus and that of the rest of us is that while he was sinless, we are full of sin. The root of sin is the tendency to set ourselves above others, using them for our own selfish ends and even abusing them to destruction if they interfere with our own satisfaction. Sin is, in other words, an attitude of mind that shows itself in our relationships with other people, even those whom we sincerely believe we love. In Jesus there was no egoistical self-concern, only complete self-giving on behalf of the whole human race. Indeed, he and the Father are one in consciousness, and just as God provides unceasingly for us in our life on earth, so his son gave of himself unsparingly to provide for our spiritual release from the bondage of sin to the freedom of full personhood in God. In other words, he came and gave himself in order that we might be like him.

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Christ has given us the guarantee of something very great and wonderful to come: through his glory and goodness you will be able to share the divine nature and escape corruption in a world that is sunk in vice (2 Pet 1,4).

The purpose of life, therefore, is one of growth, from selfishness to identification with all mankind, from emotional dependence to self-giving, from demands for safety to a willingness to undergo renunciation, even self-sacrifice on behalf of one's fellow men. For it is in giving freely that we gain the knowledge of that which is beyond price, a participation in the eternity of God, who is the supreme No-thing that embraces and transcends all finite being. That these gigantic spiritual statements may rise from mere intellectual abstraction on to living form requires an active participation in that most remarkable of all experiences, the flow of life. The way of growth is the way of death, death to a known path of endeavour and a progress in darkness which by faith leads on to a new insight of resurrection. Only he who has fathomed the ceaseless advent of death in his life can know the meaning of resurrection, which is an eternal event, though punctuated by dramatic episodes.

We begin to die soon after we are born, when the unconditional acceptance that attends maternal love and warmth is succeeded by the experience of separate identity. Then we learn that acceptance is no longer free but is closely dependent on our own attitude and actions. In the allegory of the Fall, as soon as Adam and Eve gain illicit control of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, they realize they are separate beings and hide themselves from God, with whom they had previously enjoyed an undisturbed intimacy. Now they discover their nakedness as a thing of shame, their physical nature as a mark of animal corruptibility. From this time on they and their descendants can know God only as their will is refined and they can respond worthily to him. Their life on earth is to be one of toil, unrelieved suffering and death. But always in the distance shines the promise of reconciliation between man and God that pervades the entire Old Testament revelation. The great advance is that the human being has to grow into fully conscious union with God rather than grasp God's love unconsciously and thoughtlessly, as did his ancestors Adam and Eve before they asserted their wills in freedom and selfishness.

The life of the human being is punctuated by a series of deaths, some minor and others decidedly major. Amongst the inevitable minor deaths of life that are the reverse side of growth into

adulthood, are leaving home to experience the new environment of a school, a place of higher learning or training, and eventually a completely separate milieu in the establishment of one's own distinctive lifestyle, which may culminate in marriage and the procreation of a new family. To the young person growing up this departure of old ways of life is accepted without comment, because it is to be superseded by something much more fulfilling. But the parents suffer more permanently, because the departure of their young heralds a progressive attrition of their life, which moves relentlessly towards the final phase of sickness, old age and death. There comes a time in any life in which these three final experiences have to be contemplated with stern realism, when the fruits of personal existence are presented to one starkly in what one has achieved materially, what one has given in love to others, and how one has grown into the knowledge of the being of God. Material achievement is comparatively evanescent, but the love one has bequeathed in service to one's fellow creatures and the dedication to God that has been revealed in one's life are eternal qualities. They are part of the world's treasury of light and also the presage of the life of the individual in the world beyond death.

Our earthly toil is a mere parenthesis in eternity, and yet each moment is of eternal significance. Every work done well and in integrity adds its content of cosmic blessing, every action done in love brings healing to the jangled psychic atmosphere that encompasses the material universe. It is in this psychic milieu that we live and communicate with one another; it nourishes us by the power of the Holy Spirit, but it can also be destructive when its currents become aberrant and its directives perverse. Spirituality, especially in its christian context, while always aware of the eternal significance of every action, also acknowledges the reality of the world of form as a testimony of God's providence. When the Word became flesh, he demonstrated categorically God's involvement in the material universe, not simply as creator and sustainer, but also as friend and fellow-partaker in the weal and woe of mortal life. St Paul in a flash of inspiration saw that the creation still retains the hope of being freed, like mankind, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God (Rom 8,21). This is indeed the hidden meaning of each human life — it is a means towards the resurrection of the individual person and also of the whole created universe. Once this fact of spiritual life has been grasped, the major as well as the minor deaths of mortal life begin to

fall into place, but let it be said at once that this understanding does not come primarily from the lips of teachers or the pages of learned books; it comes from the heart of life's experience as we are led mysteriously through the darkness of suffering towards the shores of a new life.

But the even, though downward, course of earthly life is often interrupted abruptly by tragedies of a more cataclysmic intensity that seem to make nonsense of all our hopes and endeavours, sometimes apparently putting an end to all expectation of useful activity in the future. These are the major deaths in a life that at once stamp its uniqueness and point to a significance beyond earthly recompense. They put an end decisively to the agreeable expectations we had tacitly taken for granted and bring us into the cheerless chill of isolated self-awareness. They may indeed afford one the first clear glimpse of oneself that one has ever had the time or patience to register. Among the tragedies that cut us down to size and destroy all the illusions of the unthinking past there is first of all the unremitting pain of bodily disease. This pain includes progressive enfeeblement of a vital means of communication such as sight, hearing or mobility. Eventually we may become so imprisoned in our own distress and impotence that there is little meaning in life outside our own self-enclosed hell. Irremediable emotional suffering is another experience of personal death; it usually follows the loss of someone whose presence formed the very basis of meaningful life, and the grief that is evoked casts a dark shadow that obliterates all light of purpose for the future. A terrible failure or humiliation may shatter the future plans of constructive living that had been laid with great confidence in the imagination, while betrayal by someone close to one in affection can poison the roots of trust on which all real relationships depend. These moments of crisis in our lives, when we are confronted unassailably by pain, emotional suffering, failure, doubt or grief of such an intensity as to render any rational response impossible and the only immediate solution total obliteration of all consciousness in the void of sleep or death, are also the moments of time in which resurrection becomes possible. It is at these points of crisis that prayer becomes a living force, and spirituality matures from a childish dependence on God for all good things to an active co-operation with the divine voice that makes itself a living power in the depths of one's own being.

There are three ways in which these apparently purposeless tragedies can be confronted: rejection, submission or acceptance.

The first, *rejection*, is a flat denial of life, summed up in the advice of his wife to Job: 'Do you still mean to persist in your blamelessness? Curse God and die' (Job 2,9). This certainly solves the immediate problem but leaves the void of eternal life unfilled. The second, *submission*, is a passive attitude of hanging on, hoping beyond hope that the cloud will eventually lift and the pain will be surmounted by the passage of time. The third and noblest way, *acceptance*, means giving of oneself actively and unsparingly to the experience upon one, even when one is quite ignorant as to where one is being led. There is courage and faith in this approach, and one is aware of reaping a benefit even when the suffering is most acute. The fruit of this active participation in life's travail is a growing awareness of the springs of one's own being, which matures into a visibly greater self-control and spiritual understanding. The way, terrible as it is in direct confrontation, becomes at the same time a challenge and a revelation of supernatural grace once we are ready to receive it wholeheartedly and without resentment. The growth into full sanctity that attends the lives of many of the biblical heroes is striking; they attain their fulness of character in passing through the refining fire of suffering. Particularly striking examples are Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Job and Jeremiah. Their New Testament counterparts, the apostles of Christ and especially Peter and Paul, continue this process in their lives. Jesus too, though sinless, reaches the apogee of perfection as he relinquishes all divine power and lets himself die as a criminal on the cross of human cruelty.

During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the One who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard. Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation and was acclaimed by God with the title of high priest of the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5, 7-10).

Jesus's submission was one of active acceptance; he too grew spiritually in the school of suffering until he attained an eternal priesthood in God. This is indeed the end of all suffering borne in the acceptance that comes from humility and faith.

We can also think of the prayer that Jesus uttered, for it is prayer alone that can carry us through the rationally impenetrable darkness of the hell within us that is laid bare as we traverse life's tragic interludes. When we are triumphant there is usually little time in

our lives for prayer because we are so replete with success and the honours that the world confers. Our growth may indeed encompass worldly supremacy, but this is followed in due course by attrition and death. When we are brought low, God can at last enter our lives and his Spirit can inspire us to a calling that transcends worldly peaks of glory; it is a calling to share the divine nature and escape the corruption of a vicious world, to quote 2 Peter 1,4 once more. When one finally grasps the fact of prayer's necessity, one is first tempted to ask the unknown God to remove the cause of trouble, or at least to mitigate the terrible suffering that it has occasioned. It is a fact that pain of this magnitude is seldom removed or even immediately relieved, for the circumstances that have brought it about are heralds of a new way of life for the sufferer. He is being told that he cannot go back to old patterns of thought and endeavour. He is on a forward path into the unknown, the only light on which is the flame of faith that burns unceasingly in the soul, though admittedly sometimes only as a feeble flicker. Eventually this early communion with God matures into self-giving contemplation, when one seeks God's presence for himself alone. And then his Spirit can descend upon us as it did upon Jesus after his baptism. At this point a change begins to manifest itself in our personality, subtle yet definite, slight at first yet of growing intensity. This change is the purification of the ego, so that it ceases to claim privileges and benefits, and learns to be quiet and attentive. From its place of pre-eminence and mastery, it now voluntarily recedes into a background of service. We are told that love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous, boastful or conceited, never rude or selfish (1 Cor 13,4). The ego is now infused with this love from God, since it is from him that all love flows.

Once the ego has accustomed itself to its new role of servant of the personality, it also gratefully becomes the servant of all humanity, indeed of all life. Once we can relinquish our childish view of existence with ourselves as the centre around which all else has to revolve, we can take our place quietly as a nameless presence in the company of our fellows. And that nameless presence is one with the stranger who met the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is Christ himself who meets us in the tragedy of the moment, and reveals the truth of God to us. As we lose our life for his sake and the gospel, so we discover a core of identity within us that will never die, since it is of the nature of eternity. Therefore, if we can traverse the valley of the shadow of death in a faith that is consummated in silence, we shall cease to be appalled by the bleakness of the future. Instead we

shall move with calm resolve into the prospect before us. This is the fruit of acceptance, which is made real to us in the ministry of Jesus. It moves first from worldly triumph to transfiguration, but then it descends into passion, crucifixion and physical death. This is succeeded by resurrection into full communion with the Father. Without crucifixion there can be no resurrection into a new type of body, and no ascension to full equality with the Father. This in turn is a presage of our own resurrection from death to immortality.

The prayer that heralds this change of consciousness that unmitigated suffering evokes is, 'thy will be done' or, 'let what you have said be done to me', in the words of the Blessed Virgin at the time of the annunciation. When our will is infused with God's will, we do not sacrifice our autonomy. Instead we can act for the first time in our lives as effectual free agents in the service of the Almighty, for then our blemishes are healed by his Spirit and we can co-operate in willed intent with him. He does not overpower us; instead he fills us with his Spirit who cleanses us and makes us effective agents to do the remedial work that is our calling and destiny. Prayer does not change our circumstances so much as enable us to bear and make use of them more fruitfully. And then, when we have grown inwardly into more mature, complete people — when the personality has seen an integration of unconscious elements into the conscious awareness of the present moment — the darkness of the present distress seems to lift from us, and a light shines that shows us the path ahead of us. The cup is not taken from us any more than it was from Jesus at Gethsemane, but somehow we are enabled to drain it to the dregs and gain sustenance from it. It is in this way that we grow into a fuller, nobler humanity, one revealed definitively for us in the life of Jesus. The end of acceptance is not a mute descent into disintegration; it is one of transfiguration of the personality and effective service rendered joyously to all God's creatures.

St Paul writes, 'I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness. Let your tolerance be evident to everyone, the Lord is very near' (Phil 4,4-5). This tolerance is the ultimate fruit of the various experiences of self-denigration that shake the very foundations of our faith in life. Tolerance is an open-hearted acceptance of people as they are, without judgment and without flinching from the full thrust of their wayward natures. It does not merely mean letting people do or believe what they will provided they do not interfere with one's own

comfort; this is simply permissiveness, and it has a neutral detachment about it that is a denial of a real relationship. Tolerance in the spiritual sense accepts people for what they are and loves them unconditionally, as Jesus did the population around him. He seemed to be particularly at home with prostitutes, tax-gatherers and others of low moral stature; without ever having to descend to their level of existence to make a relationship with them, he could flow out to them in warm appreciation and healing love. In other words he could communicate from his own centre to a vast mass of people — as he does today also through the gospel. He lifted those around him to his level of understanding, always provided they were willing, for he was not a spiritual dictator. He brought out the best in those who gave themselves to his love. In the words of the earlier prophets, they ceased to do evil and started to do good. This change was not brought about by threats or exhortations, but simply by the radiation of his own goodness.

When we have been relieved of our ego-centred view of ourselves that we project as our 'image' in the world, we can start to be authentically what God made us. Being, as it were, like little children again, at least in terms of guilelessness, openness and honesty, we can relate spontaneously to all who will accept us for what we are. And the more we are able to accept others, the more people will come into our orbit of caring. We do not have continually to proclaim Christ verbally; instead of speaking about him, we let him speak through us in solicitude and self-giving love. Only thus can he enter the lives of many people authentically and permanently.

It is strange that, as Jesus said, 'Anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Mk 10, 15). We have to grow away from our childhood, apparently only to re-enter it later on. But we return, stripped of illusions of grandeur and importance by the refining fire of life's various misfortunes and bringing with us the experience of dereliction and the ways of coping with it. Thus, in our second childhood we need no longer make demands on those around us, as we did when we were small. Instead of being served, we can now serve all others in pain with the authority that comes of personal experience. No one can teach us how to be kind; we learn kindness in the spontaneous goodness that we encounter in the actions of strangers who put themselves out for us in times of need and emergency. This was, no doubt, what the prodigal son brought back with him to his father's household when he was once again installed in his own kingdom.