

PRAYING THE PASSION

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IT IS NOT easy to attempt to say something worthwhile on the prayer of the Third Week in the Spiritual Exercises. Looking around at available literature on the Exercises, it can be noticed how little is written on this week. Perhaps, too, it is a fairly general experience that there is not a great deal to be spoken about in helping an exercitant over these days. And yet the mystery entered into here, that of being with Christ in his suffering and death, is very great, so that even if words and statements do not come confidently it is still right to pause over the issue of praying the Passion. I hope, then, that the few observations made here will provide some stimulus for personal reflection. They are based on my own efforts to learn in giving the Exercises and are offered for what they are worth. I should also mention that I have the thirty-day retreat in mind throughout, made according to the twentieth annotation.

An initial point should be made about the general meaning of this part of the Exercises, before moving forward to more detailed considerations. If an exercitant has been making the choice of a way of life or has been making some other serious options, according to what is set out by Ignatius in his paragraphs on the Election (Exx 169-189), then it is clear that this time will be approached to some extent in terms of a confirmation of the decision or decisions made—as is said, for instance, in the 1599 Directory. Sometimes of course the question of such concrete choosing does not arise, and would be unreal to the situation of the exercitant—although I would expect that some decisive reorientation or renewal should have been occurring towards the end of the Second Week. But in every case, whether or not the election has been of significance, and whether or not the aspect of confirmation is to be present in the contemplations of the Passion, I think that it should be understood that in some important way exercitants are now being invited into a deeper identification with Christ. This call to a deeper or greater involvement, to put it in this general way, is surely a good part of the reality being opened

up in the prayer of the Third Week, and needs to be kept in mind by the director.

1 *Entering the Third Week*

What about the actual experience of entering into this week? Inevitably enough, I think, it is a transition which evokes many different reactions in people. The Cross and the suffering of Christ indeed, have already been present in the prayer: in the colloquy with Christ crucified in the First Week (Exx 53), in the third point of the nativity contemplation in the Second Week (Exx 116) and really in the whole sense of the third mode of humility (Exx 167), with its antecedents in the Call of the King and in the Two Standards. All of this may facilitate what is to happen now, but not necessarily. Clearly, there are some who are attracted to praying with the mysteries of the Passion, and are drawn forward peacefully, even if tired at this stage of the retreat. But others expect it to be difficult, and may feel dread at the prospect or have various feelings of uncertainty. They may say that they have avoided this subject before, or have been uncomfortable during Holy Week. And directors too can have their own difficulties, perhaps being unsure themselves of the meaning and place of Christ's Passion, and with memories of their own seemingly unsatisfactory prayer.

However, it is good to realize that the movement of the retreat is one which will tend to carry people forward, as experience will show. If there are anxieties in retreatants, it can be useful to talk these over. Even if as directors we are unsure, that need not form a barrier to the way in which we are meant to be available and of help. We can go ahead, believing in the rightness of the unfolding pattern of the Exercises, wishing to entrust our retreatants to whatever the experience of praying the Passion is to be for them. The truth is that what is being entered upon is a great mystery, which is bound to affect retreatants and directors alike. The Passion of Christ relates directly to what affects us most deeply in our human experience—our own suffering, and that of others, near and far away. More than this, it opens us to the depths of the heart of God, perceived in the defencelessness of Christ broken and suffering, bearing in himself our sin and that of the world.

So we move ahead, being confronted with the reality of the Passion, and what could be called its objectivity to our Christian faith. For, no matter what way we try to understand it and

whatever our feelings, it remains that the Passion is 'there'. It is 'there' in the Exercises just as in the gospels themselves, as the culmination of the life of Jesus—and so those who have been desiring and praying in the Second Week to walk with him in discipleship will wish to be with him here too, even if the prospect gives rise to pain and a sense of incomprehension. So this reality of the mystery, and the desire of retreatants to remain with Jesus, can give sufficient confidence to a director as the matter of the first contemplations is proposed.

2 *Important points in the Exercises*

In looking then to the prayer itself during the Third Week, it is well to notice some of the key elements, especially those in the text of the Exercises, which shape and give a particular quality to the contemplations.

There is above all, I think, a sense of the great immediacy of what is to be contemplated. Christ is portrayed as present and as *now* undergoing his Passion. This is seen especially in the text of the first contemplation, on the last supper (Exx 190–199), which seems intended to set the pattern for the contemplations of the whole week. It is an immediacy which was there at the beginning of the Second Week, in the contemplations on the Incarnation and the nativity. But the Passion seems to bring an even greater sense of it.¹

Especially important here is the grace to be prayed for, which will be according to the desire present in anyone entering into the closeness of the contemplation of the Passion: 'sorrow, compassion, and shame because the Lord is going to his suffering for my sins' (Exx 193). And by the time of the second contemplation, on the agony and the arrest of Jesus, the words conveying what is to be desired and prayed for are stronger: 'sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the great affliction Christ endures for me' (Exx 203). In the phraseology of these third preludes, there is contained the whole mystery of sin in the First Week, with the central vision even there of Christ dying on the cross. Further, the meaning of the Incarnation and of the labours of Christ, as contemplated in the Second Week, is also present here in these concentrated words. All that has gone before is being brought forward here into earnest prayer for sorrow and for a real identification with Christ suffering.

So there is expected to be a close union in the prayer between the exercitant and Christ. This is not spoken of as something occurring in a passive way, as is usually understood when there is reference to unitive prayer. But rather, in considering here all that Christ is undergoing 'for my sins' (Exx 193, 197), 'for me' (203), the exercitant is told to make an effort and to labour (195) in turn in the prayer, and also to think over 'what I ought to do and suffer for him' (197). It is therefore an active form of prayer, leading to practical decisions and orientations, in which the exercitant is to become more and more committed to Christ and his way, and if necessary using once again the triple colloquy from the Two Standards (199).

3 *Different ways of prayer*

Of course in practice the actual prayer experience may take many different forms. A director who has guided even a small number of people in making the Exercises knows this, and hopefully will have wanted retreatants to be guided in praying the Passion in whatever way seemed most appropriate. How is this appropriateness to be assessed? That is hard to say. God alone knows best, and he it is who initiates and leads each one in prayer. There must be a real freedom here, and sensitivity to what is of God, in order truly to allow 'the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15).² The best that can be done is to note briefly some of the ways which seem to occur in retreatants' prayer at this stage of the Exercises, and in the hope that some of the points noted will be of value.

There is then a way which approximates more or less to that described in the Exercises, and with elements as described above. There is an evident and moving compassion with Christ suffering. There is a deep sorrow, which is once again the fruit of the grace prayed for in the First Week, being received more fully here—and perhaps it is a grace which seemed not to come before, but now is released and given in the prayer of the Passion.

There may be a certain ease in the prayer, by which the person is carried along. Perhaps it may require more obviously the effort and labour as described by Ignatius, so that even if an election has been made there are perhaps new and important questions arising now as to how to respond to all that Christ is doing. In all of this, the exercitant's involvement with Christ in his Passion is

clear, with a deeply personal response to the Lord 'who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2,20).

But if this is according to what is outlined and expected by Ignatius, it must also be said that there is another way experienced by many, where praying the Passion remains dry and difficult throughout. There is no evident consolation. There is instead what looks like desolation, in which a person may feel distant from Christ suffering, and seemingly unconcerned. 'Am I cold-hearted? . . . I can't make it real for myself . . . Perhaps the truth is that I am too afraid to face what is in it', are the kinds of questions and reflections which can spontaneously arise in such a situation.

Here it might be wise to check out again the human variables of generosity, preparation, giving the time to prayer, review and general attitude (see Exx 6). Yet I may know the retreatant well by now, and there is no need to check out these things—I know that he or she is investing the right effort, and that there are still aridity and difficulty, giving rise to genuine upset that this is so and not according to the more usual expectations. Really, then, I should appreciate that there the Passion *is* being prayed. Here is someone coming time and time again to prayer, desiring to be with Christ suffering, feeling helpless about it all, and still giving time faithfully despite all the conflicting emotions. That is surely a true prayer of the Passion. It is God who takes care of this prayer—and indeed this is so in all our prayers once we make the effort to come and to offer ourselves to whatever it is meant to be. There may be many human reasons as to why prayer is experienced as difficult, but, in the end, once we come to pray, God is there and can make fruitful and meaningful what is intimately his own concern.

It could be, of course, that a person has generally avoided suffering and conflict in life, and, noticing an instinct now to run away, comes to realize what has been happening. That can be a blessed moment, for in the helplessness of it there is an opportunity to turn to Christ and be with him in a new way.

But it can also be the case that there has been in fact much experience of suffering in life—and all of this is coming up now, leading to distress in the contemplation of the pain and sorrow of Christ. Further, anger and bewilderment at the intractability of human suffering and at the apparent remoteness of God will compound the matter, making it very difficult indeed to contemplate a Christ said to be suffering on behalf of the world and

especially for oneself. Staying with the Passion under conditions like these is a challenge for both retreatant and director. Feelings and hidden attitudes surfacing can require talking out as well as needing to be brought to prayer. It might be that even a conversion is called for, and with it the dissolution of accumulated resentment—a surprise, perhaps, because the experience of the First Week may have been considered good in some respects.

Yet only now is the truth appearing, in the painful, sustained contemplation of the beloved Son overwhelmed with suffering, bearing the unbearable burden of the enormity of the sin of the world. It appears too in the accompanying realization that one has been holding out in some situation apart from this place where eternal love is poured out endlessly, so that now there is a change and a new yielding to that love. For only here in the Passion is the truth known fully, which may have been only glimpsed in the meditations of the First Week—the truth about oneself as sinful and loved, and the truth about all the situations of the world, which comes out in contemplating the innocent Lord made into sin for our sake, ‘so that in him we might become the uprightness of God’ (2 Cor 5,21).

Now, if some conversion such as this occurs in an evident way, involving a change of outlook and consciousness, then obviously the experience will move towards that described by Ignatius. After darkness and difficulty, the grace of ‘sorrow with Christ in sorrow . . . because of the great affliction Christ endures for me’ (Exx 203) will most likely be given in a moving and conscious way.

But apart from this kind of case there can be that continuing and painful experience which can be hard to endure, and especially if coming after a Second Week which had much sensible consolation in it. Yet the faithfulness to the prayer, and the desire to remain with Christ even if feeling completely helpless and inadequate, can surely be a sign of good prayer. After all, that is the way we are present to someone loved who is suffering or dying. We are helplessly, painfully present; it is a labour and an effort to be there, and yet we could not be anywhere else. For many people making the Exercises, the prayer of the Third Week is like this human experience, and that is all right. Unsure, uncertain, with conflicting emotions, they nevertheless stay with Christ suffering, and that is all that matters.

A third way of praying seems like that just described, and may incorporate elements already noted and yet I think there is some

essential difference. It is what occurs when someone's prayer in everyday life has become contemplative, virtually wordless, a matter of deep and persevering faith. Coming to the retreat, then, this form in the prayer has to be respected. It is wrong to impose the more active pattern of prayer given in the text of the *Exercises*, and it would do violence to the way God is working now. The right approach is rather to allow the prayer to continue in its simple contemplative way, but with some reading and pondering of material as a preparation and with a period of reflection after each time of prayer. If this is done, then there is an appropriate adaptation of the Exercises, which respects the person's prayer and yet follows the basic framework given by Ignatius.³

As I say, this may appear similar to the dry and difficult prayer of the Passion mentioned already—and often indeed the presenting form of contemplative prayer is much the same. But the principal difference is that here the person cannot really engage in an active and meditative form of prayer, and so if this is attempted—as can happen due to pressures to 'make the Exercises properly'—there is strain and a real lack of freedom, leading to disturbance. So let it be as God would wish. The results bear their own evidence, as a good director will see soon enough. In the time of the Third Week, therefore, the prayer continues in this contemplative form, where the drawing is to be simply with or before Christ in faith, and allowing the divine activity to work its way in secret. In the prayer, but more likely out of it, various patterns may thread their way along, such as a sense of what Christ endures, his loneliness, or an experience of the distance of the sinner from what Christ alone is carrying for him, and also some ungraspable realization of how greatly one is being cared for, and how much too the dark and sinful world is loved.

A fourth way is one which is more evidently mystical. It might at first seem like what is expected in the text of the *Exercises*—and no doubt there is some such quality hidden in that written by a great mystic—because of the sensible and affective elements present. But what happens in mystical prayer is something given directly by God and normally part of a great and continual living in him, which has not come about in a short time. In this state, for instance, I think that 'consolation without previous cause' (Exx 330,336) is the usual or only kind of consolation experienced. It is directly from God, and is what happens 'when an effect of the spirit overflows in the senses', as John of the Cross succinctly puts

it.⁴ This is quite different from what comes in some way as a result of one's own efforts to grieve and be sad (Exx 195,206). It is something wholly from God, because the operation of the faculties has become divine in some substantive way, and so the overflowing effect in the sensibility is fundamentally from above, unlike what used to come in good part from below, from one's own activity and initiative.

It could be, however, that the signs of the mystical way are hardly observable, so that what is being lived is virtually in secret and very quiet. Further, it could also be that God, for his own purposes and for the sake of the Church, will initiate a sharing in the Passion which may 'reach the point of an extreme powerlessness, an experience of inner darkness, abandonment and reprobation',⁵ which possibly might be considered as a participation in Christ's own experience on the cross. And if this is so, then it must be a situation sustained and protected by God, and in which some other person's role is only to be alongside in faith and in prayer.

Perhaps this division into ways of praying the Passion may seem arbitrary. Still, in my experience there is some basis to the differentiation, especially between the first and the second pair, where in the latter case contemplative prayer is present in either a secret and beginning phase or else in an obvious and mystical way. And various points mentioned may overlap, as where those difficulties considered earlier may in fact signal an entry into contemplative prayer. In any case, we need to keep in mind the dynamic of the prayer as given in the Exercises, while also remaining sensitive to that freedom which is the prerogative of God's leading—and to which we will be open in a right way as we learn from experience and as we come to understand more of the ways of the life of prayer.

4 *'Passion of Christ, strengthen me'*

What generally, is happening in praying the Passion? What is the meaning of this Third Week in the Spiritual Exercises? It is hard, and possibly it may be unwise, to try to look for an exact answer. But some indications have been given incidentally already, and perhaps some further notes here may point towards the meaning.

Early on it was suggested that the purpose of the week has to do generally with the call to deeper identification with Christ, and

surely this is the case. If an election of some importance has been made—and which was born out of a desire to be closer to Christ—then here in the contemplation of the Passion that desire is being realized and brought about in an authentic way. The identification is beginning to be lived out in the prayer itself:

In the petition of the Third Week, we ask to be sorrowful *with* Christ sorrowful: what is at issue is a sense of identification. In fact we pray that we may be incorporated into that very *kenosis* which was the predominant feature of Jesus's life. We pray for a real participation in the radical self-forgetfulness for which he prayed and which bore fruit in his resurrection and in our redemption in him.⁶

Somehow, here, there is a renunciation of self and a poverty of spirit which is at the heart of the Two Standards and the 'third mode of humility', as the meaning of what was asked for then becomes clearer in this time of the contemplation of Christ suffering, namely a self-forgetful love of him, shown in being with him despite the pain and the cost.

This self-forgetful love is also, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has shown, a deeper and more complete living of the First Week, where now our sin is both most conspicuous and overpowering and yet perceived only in the loneliness and anguish of Christ bearing it:

Whether I shed tears or follow the scene dry-eyed with the gaping crowds and the soldiers affects the situation very little. Contemplation of the Passion demands self-abasement, adoration without self-regard, the simple consideration of the scenes, happenings and the inner states of the suffering Christ . . . At this particular moment, my guilt appears so evident and conspicuous that it does not need to be brought to the light; and, on the other hand, in so far as it is mine it is insignificant, because only the burden it has placed on the Lamb of God is visible and of consequence.⁷

With this personal realization there can also be an awareness of the suffering of the world, the anguish of oppressed peoples, the pain of inequality and indignity. And yet even here, with an overwhelming consciousness of the mountains of grief and injustice, there can come about a very simple and awestruck contemplation

of the one who alone bears all things. For no one there among the crowds gazing, apart from Mary, and no one now even in the night of suffering and injustice, could claim to be innocent and just, or could avoid consciousness of personal guilt in truthfully looking on him. Even the awareness or the experience of suffering gives way to the perspective of the Lamb of God who takes away that sin of the world which is at the root of injustice, suffering and death, and who could say even in what was being done to him, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23,34).

In contemplating therefore the beloved Son, 'crushed because of our guilt' (Isai 53,5), in being with him suffering because that is what he has asked of us, we are in that place where the depth of eternal love is laid open and where the world is being reconciled. Here is love, in a suffering compared to which the suffering experience of the world is but a mute echo—and yet, in reconciling us, it reaches out and into all the night anguish of pain and injustice. We would have run away, unworthy of it, but are encompassed in its reaching out and drawn towards it and made good in it. Living there, in turn we are also called and formed to be at the disposal of such grace for the world, in a manner similar to it, by which 'God so loved the world' (Jn 3,16). Here we are conformed to the Son in his mission, to Christ suffering (Exx 48,167,203), and likewise in him can yield a rich harvest and bear abundant fruit (Jn 12,24; 15,5) for the Kingdom.

So it can be seen that the prayer of the Passion is not to be considered secondary to the important time of decision and mission in the Second Week, but should be viewed rather as a deepening of what has been opted for then, when the whole desire was to be close to Christ in discipleship and, insofar as he called to it, to share intimately in his work of redemption for the world.

Of course, what is entered into in a real way in this prayer is meant to be lived out in the rest of life, beyond the actual experience of making the Exercises. To live in the great reality prayed for eventually, in the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God (Exx 230-237), will mean that in very existential and human ways one will be brought further 'to know him and the power of his resurrection, and partake of his sufferings by being moulded to the pattern of his death' (Phil 3,10). Some people coming to the Exercises are already living these mysteries in an eminent way—and so the retreat tends to take the form of a particular

deepening and appropriation of the gifts received—but more often there are those for whom the experience of the Exercises will consist in good seed sown, which is meant to germinate and come forth in all of life's future circumstances.

I would consider too, regarding the particular orientation of discipleship given in the Second Week, and especially if the choice has been difficult and with acute awareness of human inadequacy, that there is strength given in the prayer of the Passion. There would be consolation and encouragement of course in the prayer of the Resurrection, but also too there is a help in the contemplation of Christ suffering: 'Passion of Christ, strengthen me'. For just as the Lord himself was strengthened in his agony, so a person will be here too, when faced with the prospect of future trials and difficulties which will arise as a result of a choice or choices made.⁸ In this way, it can be said that there is confirmation given for what has been decided upon, or for a new orientation or understanding. There is strength given in looking to Christ, especially consisting in an underlying peace amid the conflicting emotions of facing the future, and which will also be there at further points along the way.

5 *Being with Mary*

As the prayer progresses towards the end of this Week, a final point comes to mind, and which I believe bears upon the issue of being strengthened and confirmed. This is the fact that Mary is near at hand at this time—'Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother', we are told in the Gospel of John (19,25), along with the women and the disciple he loved. And Ignatius wishes a retreatant to be close to her after the taking down from the cross (Exx 208, under the sixth and seventh days), in the final stages of the prayer of the Passion. This seems very right, and is a source of encouragement. It is right to be near her—near the one person among us who stood there with an innocence wrought by her Son which we cannot claim, who walked the way of greatest faith and self-giving, and who shared terribly his pitiless humiliation. For Mary plays a great role in the Exercises, as retreatants often witness to, when they speak of the ways in which they experience her help. Whoever then is with her, and is led to consider 'her great sorrow and weariness' (Exx, 208) after Jesus' death, is surely strengthened, and perhaps given to understand in a special way how we are being brought into that home where all alienation and

unlikeness are changed, and where redeemed humanity is being clothed in the likeness of the beloved Son.

The prayer may have been perceived as good in some tangible way, or it may have been dry and bitter. People undergo very different experiences of the Passion, and yet what matters is that they have remained with Christ, despite perhaps a deep sense of unworthiness. In this there is love—and there is too an opening out to the world, because that is the kind of love it is. And the rest follows now, as the fulness of the mystery unfolds in this moment. For here at the end of the Third Week Ignatius makes the prayer virtually the same as that at the beginning of the Fourth Week⁹—it is a prayer in the presence of Mary, and it will be with her too that the Resurrection will be contemplated. She has been present throughout the Exercises. She was central to the prayer of the Incarnation, when the desire was first given in the text to appreciate Christ and to follow him more closely (Exx 104)—and with her now will also be approached the mystery of the Resurrection, when the desire will be to rejoice intensely ‘because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord’ (Exx 221).

NOTES

¹ William Peters: in *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: exposition and interpretation* (New Jersey, 1968), p 136, speaks of the preferred use of the present tense now.

² See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (London, 1961), pp 107–109, on freedom in the prayer of the Exercises.

³ See John Govan, ‘Spiritual direction for a contemplative’, *The Way Supplement* 54 (Autumn 1985), pp 60–70; and my own article, ‘The prayer of faith, spiritual direction and the Exercises’, *The Way*, vol 25, no 4 (October 1985), pp 315–324.

⁴ *The living flame of love*, stanza 2, para 14; in *The collected works of St John of the Cross*, trans Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, (New York, 1964), p 600.

⁵ Von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, p 235., see pp 233–246.

⁶ McNamara, Brian: ‘Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane: interpretation and identification’, *The Way Supplement* 27 (Spring 1976), p 86.

⁷ Von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, p 241.

⁸ See Brian McNamara, *op. cit.*, p 87.

⁹ See William Peters, *op. cit.*, pp 141–143.