

THE HEART OF CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF TURMOIL

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Combateness seems to be in the air these days. Picking up any kind of news source, one is bombarded with the awfulness of the current political scene where the “dog-eat-dog” mentality is constantly being played out. One can’t help be unnerved by it all, yet switching over to a more spiritual scenario, one can also take note that as Christians and followers of a crucified Lord, our religious values have also been forged out of conflict, pain, and turmoil. The cross we wear or carry symbolizes that God’s mysterious plan of salvation chose to unfold through the violent forces of this world. Our way to God’s heart is vitally connected to the lance thrust that pierced the human heart of Jesus. The drama of Jesus’ own life testifies that through darkness, chaos, anguish and excruciating discomfort, God’s light and grace and redemptive love was made real.

In confronting the forces of evil in his own short earthly ministry, Jesus left us a distinct model of responding to the destructive elements present in reality. Jesus’ mission was to spread the Good News about the Father’s kingdom; one, as we are told, which is built largely on love and on the justice, peace, and joy which emanate directly from love. Unlike older Oriental religions which sought to transcend the turmoil, pain, and corruption of this world and which sought to attain a state of release from its distortions, Christianity opted to confront the evil existent in creation in an age-old battle of cosmic powers. So we see Jesus in combat with a host of earthly adversaries. The New Testament is revealing in this regard, showing us the conflicts Jesus engaged in with Satan (Mt 12, 28), with the forces of nature (Mk 4, 39), with mental illness and demonic possession, with the religious leaders of his time (Mt 5, 21-48; Mk 7, 1-23). Furthermore, conflict erupted with the crowds he drew, with his disciples and family members who did not understand his mission from the Father (Lk 2, 41-52; Mk 3, 31-35; Mk 4, 13; 8, 14-45), even, as shown in his last hours in the Garden of Gethsemane, with his own instinctive clinging to life and his natural aversion to suffering when these came in the way of doing the will of his heavenly Father (Mk 14, 32-42; Mt 4, 1-11).

Nevertheless, in the events of Jesus’ life, in his own words, there is a clear and definite choice for the way of physical non-violence. Jesus identified with the role of the “suffering servant” as portrayed by the prophet Isaiah. Instead of countering violence with violence, He overcame violence by freely submitting to it. He refused to retaliate. Some might think Jesus’ non-aggressive stance in the final hours of his life as a capitulation to a form of passivity. However, I do not think it was so much passivity as a growing sense of surrender to God. All necessary confrontations were now passed, what remained was God’s powerful and glorious intervention that changed human death to eternal life. The final exhortations of Jesus directed to his disciples were to go out to all the world and spread the Good News that true peace would come only through heartfelt repentance.

Life confirms the crucial truth found in the message of Jesus: no growth take place without struggle and dying. Virtue is not easily won by any person. Peace on earth doesn’t come through wishful thinking. We are still required to tackle the complexities of making right choices. Of course we yearn for peaceful settlements, not only on the world scene, but in the very intimate circles of family relationships. Yet we know that for such a peace, we must be prepared to experience the battleground of our own imperfect hearts in addition to the global groaning of all humankind.

The Gospel does assure us that despite the turmoil that Jesus encountered in his earthly ministry, his heart always remained steadfast in trust that God’s love would prevail. Trauma, interior and exterior, was not enough to shake his consistent belief that the source of all creation was a God of mercy, justice, peace and joy. Through prayer Jesus became sensitized to the promptings of the Spirit of Truth. Through ceaseless prayer and unwavering confidence the heart of Christ was fortified by the inner dynamic strength

to conquer evil with good. Even with such dispositions, no easy answers or simple solutions were possible. Life attained its purpose in the midst of turmoil. Peace was born from a depth of commitment that refused to succumb to human rejection and the fickleness of those who were half-hearted in their ways.

As we approach the events of Holy Week and the chaotic frenzy of activity against Jesus, we are challenged to look with the "eyes of faith" upon the scenes that unfold before our minds and hearts. Had we actually been there, would we react with the likes of Malchus who cut off the ear of the guard who came to arrest Jesus, or perhaps Peter who unabashedly denied even to have known Him? God only knows. Being under severe stress sometimes produces cowardly or courageous responses, out of our immediate control. In the end, hanging on the cross, Jesus understood perfectly the wayward impulses of human hearts, as he uttered the words "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23: 34). William Barclay, the renowned Scripture scholar has noted that "Jesus said many wonderful things, but rarely anything more wonderful than, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" He goes on to note that the idea of Jesus' crucifixion being done through ignorance runs through the New Testament. He cites the apostle Peter who says in Acts 3: 17: "I know that you acted in ignorance," and Paul who said that they crucified Jesus because they did not know him (Acts 13: 27). He quotes the great Roman Emperor and Stoic saint, Marcus Aurelius, who used to say to himself every morning: "Today you will meet all kinds of unpleasant people; they will hurt you, and injure you, and insult you; but you cannot live like that; you know better, for you are a man in whom the spirit of God dwells."

How tempting it is to follow the cravings of our baser natures when we see them personified everyday on the front pages of our newspapers and on our TV and computer screens. Almost without thinking, our unrestrained survival instincts shift into high gear and we end up doing what all the world is doing. Thus, we must continually remind ourselves about what we are called to be, and in whom our greatest aspirations lie: not in ourselves but in the "Pierced One," Jesus the Lord. Our former Holy Father, Benedict XVI passes on to us some wise advice in this regard. It is very fashionable, he reflects, in our current society, to "banalize" Jesus and his message into a cheap conception of merely a "nice" God. The world, in this way of thinking, becomes a place where "philanthropy" takes first place over improving our world and where the Eucharist is reduced to a fraternal meal. "But the theme of the suffering God can remain sound," he emphasizes, "only if it is anchored in love for God and in attentive adoration of his love." So we must turn our hearts more and more toward contemplating and honoring and imitating the pierced and wounded heart of our Lord who totally surrendered himself like a lamb to the Father's will. To do this implies real self-abandonment of the kind that saves itself by giving itself away. Instead of following the vain attempts at self-preservation, which we find so rampant in our culture, we are invited to turn our hearts ever outward toward the Heart of Love which empties itself continually (as in its divine nature in the Trinity).

Perhaps one of the most poignant aspects of Jesus' turbulent journey to Calvary is the fact that for a Jew the cross itself implied a sign of abandonment, so that according to the Jewish interpretation of Scripture, death on a cross was an evident sign that the one upon it was not of God. That is what the implied meaning of the parable from St. Mark (12: 8) communicated in its story about the death of the son in the parable of the tenants: "then they seized and killed him and dragged him outside the vineyard." This was an allusion really to the death of Jesus. Jesus dies outside the vineyard that is Israel, thus outside the covenant, outside the community of God, abandoned by the God of the Law. This was how the Jews viewed things.

The burdens laid upon Jesus in his final hours were indescribable, but perhaps there was none greater than his feeling of abandonment when God appeared to remain silent to his agonizing cries. Paradoxically, however, the grief which Jesus experiences even in this abandonment does not close him in, but expresses his perfect unity with God. As one Scripture scholar notes: "In the abandonment on the cross, the presence of the Father characterized itself in absence, silence, and non-intervention so that humankind might experience in estrangement the nearness of God" (Gerard Rosse).

The pain which Jesus experienced in his passion as well as the turmoil he endured in the events leading up to it, give us some insight into the unlimited love and patience to be found in his human heart. This love did not accept the restrictions that could have been placed on it by the claims of power and dignity. In his human existence, Christ did not contend to be an Untouchable, withdrawn from the vicissitudes of human emotions and feelings, one whom suffering could not affect. On the contrary, Jesus offered himself to human pain without limits and experienced it without reserve because of the sincerity of his love. How marvelous it would be if we could witness to his message of enduring love even in our own times of turmoil by our determination to hold fast to his teachings and promises, trusting that what we suffer for Him will not be in vain. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on March 6th, 2016. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, April 3rd, 2016 at 4:00 p.m.