

“ON THE NIGHT HE WAS BETRAYED”¹

When I spoke those words the other day during the Eucharistic Prayer I was struck by the sense of betrayal that must have filled the heart of Jesus on the evening of the Last Supper. He was going to be handed over by one of his chosen followers to a shameful, agonising death.

The sufferings of innocent children have filled our minds, engulfed our spirits and called forth our heartfelt prayers since the publication of the Ryan Report. Those children were betrayed. Their agony is a reproach to people who were meant to care for them but who instead vilely abused them. It reproaches everyone who knew or suspected that such horrors were taking place and who failed to act. All of us feel the shame and the grief of recognising what took place in our midst.

The whole Church, our whole society, and each one of us, owe to the people who were abused as children in Ireland everything we can do to assist them towards healing and to help them in rebuilding their lives. We particularly owe them our humble recognition of what they have suffered and of how we have failed them.

The children who were betrayed and abused may understand better than the rest of us the betrayal and the desolation that Jesus experienced. He prayed in agony that the cup of suffering might pass – as so many of them prayed that their misery would cease. His disciples denied him and abandoned him – as they were left with no one to turn to. He was mocked and humiliated and rejected – as so many of them were. He was cruelly beaten – as they were. He was an innocent victim of appalling injustice – as they were. On the Cross he cried out asking why even God his Father had forsaken him. The children were forsaken; they were abused, emotionally, physically and sexually. One child molester wrote of the effects of his actions: “I am the slayer of the soul, destroyer of the dream”².

But the added tragedy is that the agony of abuse was inflicted by people whose lives were meant to be a witness to Christ. Even as they were inflicting the horror of abuse on defenceless and innocent children, they were disguising from those children the face of the One who could understand their suffering because he too had been betrayed and had suffered. He offers a hope greater than their brokenness and a healing more powerful than what they had endured with all its long lasting effects. For too many of them that abuse has made them feel unable to receive the Eucharist, instituted on the night when Jesus was betrayed and when the sufferings of his Passion began. But nothing can cut them off from his merciful love for them (cf Rom 8:38, 39). His love goes above all to those who suffer.

The gift of God’s new creation is offered to those who “become like little children” (Mt 18:3). Little children are open and trusting; they can blossom and grow in response to real love. To take advantage of and destroy that openness, that trust and that capacity to receive love is a fundamentally inhuman, unchristian, evil deed. Whatever rationalisations may be offered, however much one may try to comprehend the mind of the abusers, however much we may pray that they will receive God’s mercy on which we all depend, nothing can excuse such cruel and criminal behaviour. In those actions Jesus was betrayed again.

We believe that the betrayal, the mockery, the scourging, the desolation of Calvary was the road by which Jesus entered the glory of new life where there is no mourning or weeping. But that was not evident to the apostles at the Last Supper or on Good Friday or on Holy Saturday. They had to wait in the darkness and desolation of their shattered lives and dreams. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were desolate; they walked with downcast faces. They told the stranger they met on the road how Jesus was sentenced to death and crucified. They expressed their disillusionment, saying “our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free” (Lk 24:21). Only later that evening did they recognise the Risen Jesus in the breaking of bread.

Our suffering bears no comparison to the darkness in which many of the survivors of abuse live. But, faced with the shattering accounts of their abuse and of the betrayal of their trust, many people in Ireland are feeling pain and shame and disillusionment. There are no quick or easy solutions. We all have to learn that we are helpless. We hang desolate on the cross; we lie in the tomb with Jesus. On the road to Emmaus, when he opened up the scriptures for the disciples he taught them that it was: “necessary that the Christ should suffer before entering into his glory” (Lk 24:25,26).

¹ Third Eucharistic Prayer

² Quoted in ROSSETTI, S., *Slayer of the Soul*, Twenty-Third Publications, Connecticut 1991, p. 19.

We are an Easter People, living in the hope of the Resurrection. But in these bleak times we would do better to see ourselves as a Holy Saturday People. We cannot just rush to Resurrection. The life of the new creation is God's gift. Hope and healing cannot come from our own resources, our achievements, our efforts or our desires, however intense. We live in the darkness of a suffering world, aware of our failures and our helplessness, often disillusioned, waiting for a gift that we cannot acquire for ourselves.

As a Church and as a nation we must try to bring whatever light we can to the men and women whose lives have been so marked by their betrayal.

But in the end our efforts remain entirely inadequate. We wait in hope for the new life that is received only through the painful acknowledgement of how we betray Jesus and his Good News, how we are sinful and vulnerable and weak, how only God can bring us into the fulfilment of our longings. If we begin to accept those realities, if we recognise our limitations and failures, it may, with God's help, assist survivors of abuse in opening themselves to God's power "which is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). And it may open us to the weakness of God "which is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25).

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