Of Suffering and Salvation

1st Sunday after Christmas

December 29th, 2019

It is the last Sunday of the year—a time to reflect, a time to look forward. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, as the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches us (Hebrews 13:8). Through history, we see the real life that Jesus lived, and the real life that he taught; we see His death and His resurrection. Through the joys and pains of today, we live with Christ, walking in His beatitudes, in His selfless manner of living, in His grace, dying to ourselves and rising to new life in His word and His Spirit. And tomorrow we look forward to meeting Jesus in hope, rising with Him into eternity, into a new heaven and a new earth, one neither made nor saved by us, but One we receive with gladness and thanksgiving from the only Saviour, the Only Begotten Son of God.

In the midst of this season, with its beautiful lights, its beautiful gifts, and the beautiful faces we celebrate these moments with, there are also shadows of loss. Many struggle with the long, dark winter nights, the short days that hardly seem like days, the painful memories and losses that have accumulated around the days before and after the solstice. It is not always a season of joy for everyone, and some question whether it should be a time of joy at all. The Gospel clearly declares that it was not a time of joy when the angels sang *Glory to God in the highest!* (Luke 2:14). Galilee and Judah sat in a darkly oppressed corner of the Roman Empire, reduced by violence and taxation and enslavement. Christ was born during the first census required by Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was governor. Luke the Evangelist frames his nativity story both historically and thematically—the King of Kings is born at a time when an Emperor has impoverished the many nations of the Mediterranean. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read further that King Herod executes an act of senseless, cruel violence against the infants of Bethlehem, hoping to extirpate the Messiah that would possibly be crowned and dethrone him: “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’” (Matthew 2:16-18). In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan rejects his belief in God, and even in justice, because he cannot comprehend the suffering in the world, especially the suffering of children; he says to Alyosha his brother: “I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child” (tr. Constance Garnett). The birth of the Saviour brought the death of numerous infants. From the beginning, the evangelists do not hide the very human questions we would bring. And there are many other things we could say about the Gospel and its irrelevance to pain and its irrelevance to meaning in our modern lives. After all, Jesus was not the only person in history to be poor. Jesus was not the only person to be kind to others. Jesus was not the only person in history to die a cruel death on a cross for no good reason. Christmas comes during good seasons of plenty; Christmas comes during seasons of drought and famine. Christmas comes during wartime. On Christmas this year, ten Christians were murdered for their faith. And many have suffered loss just as others were heading to stores to buy gifts and wine to celebrate. The birth of Jesus was not meant to invalidate your pain, to negate your experience or to demean you because of your suffering in any way. Christmas is a scandal. It begins with an embarrassed, pregnant woman and her embarrassed fiancée; it continues with the humiliation of filing taxes to unworthy overlords; it descends into the bloody chaos of massacred innocents, and continues on with exile, the flight into Egypt.

There is no good time for the Saviour to be born because time is corrupt, and we are mortals walking like shadows in darkness. Jesus was not the only one to suffer in history, but Jesus—as much as he is like you and me and like everyone else who ever walked this earth, is also not like you and me. When you look at the night sky, you do not see billions and billions of stars. They may very well be out there, but you will never count them. Instead, you see vast patches of darkness between Taurus and Orion and Auriga, between Draco and Ursa Major. This has led to the many discussions around Olbers’ Paradox. Why is there any darkness in the sky at all if there are so many stars? What is more interesting, however, is that even those dark patches have light and radiation passing through them. Otherwise we would see nothing at all. The darkness at night does not negate the fact that billions and billions of stars are out there; my inability to recognize more than a handful of constellations and count more than a handful of bright stars does not negate the countless other constellations, nebulae and stars out there. The suffering that we live through is dark—there is no denying it, and loss is tragic and sorrowful. The sorrow, however, does not extinguish any of the brightness of the Saviour or his gifts, and it does not erase the path that He Himself embodies, for He is indeed the “way, truth and life” (John 14:6). I believe truly that this man was the Son of God, and if the Son of God, then truly worthy to be praised, adored and followed with all of my heart, for it was not just a human who was born in Bethlehem, it was not just a human who had to flee into Egypt, it was not just a human who taught the beatitudes and forgave sinners, and it was not just a human who suffered on the cross. It was God Himself. God came to you and me.

And God came to you and me, not just to observe, not just to rejoice; God came to suffer with us and to walk alongside us and to serve—us. Neither our sin, nor our limitations, not our weakness nor our inhumanity nor our cruelty nor our debasement obstructed his love or prevented his coming. The One who made those billions of stars that we can never count; the One who encompasses all that has ever been and ever will be created; the One who is beyond the reach of the highest science, the highest mathematics, the highest philosophy, the highest wisdom of any kind, was laid in a manger, fragile like us, and born with a Damocles’ sword hanging over his head. Why? As the Psalmist cries out, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:4). Theoretically, God did not have to come at all. God did not have to send His Son; God did not have to take on our flesh; God did not have to give us forgiveness and eternal life. There are billions of other planets and billions of other stars; the Lord chose to visit this one. As it says in the Epistle to the Hebrews in our lectionary reading today: “It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’ And again,‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again, ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:10-18). He came to “free all those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death”—it is precisely this loss, this sorrow, this pain of our human condition that Christ has borne on the cross, that Christ came to eradicate, that we might be with God. Moreover, God wanted to be part of this creation He loved so much. God did not take on the form of a plant, an animal, or even an angel. God took the form of a human being: “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things…he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest…Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” There is nothing that we have suffered that God the Son has not suffered; there is no point in time, no matter how alone we have felt, that we have truly been alone. There is no point in time or space where God is not love and not merciful to those He made in his very own image.

Our hard times may cast shadows over what we experience and how we live, but they do not destroy the path that was prepared when Mary gave birth to a son in the town of Bethlehem. Just now, I argued that God did not have to come. And while I do not wish to diminish the lavishness of His gift, which is to deny Him, I also believe that God had to come—it is God’s nature to come because God is love (1 John 4:8). The very things that are not God—our flesh, our sin, our sorrow—God clothed Himself in these in order to be with us. There is literally nothing that God would not do just to be with us, just to redeem us and hold us in His everlasting light. To just know God is to be blessed. To know that all of this has a plan, a purpose, a meaning for us individually and collectively; to know that our tears and labours are not in vain, even if they do not save us. God saves us. God gives Himself to us. It may sound cliché, but in ancient times, when sailors and caravans were lost, they would look up to the stars to find their way. Our roads may wind through mists and shadows, but look up. Look to Christ! There is a God above you; there is a God beside you. And if you have believed on the Son of God and have received the Holy Spirit, then God is within you, guiding you and preserving You for eternity. As the apostle Paul, rich in sufferings and humiliations and losses wrote: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. God’s Love in Christ Jesus. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:18-39). In hope we are saved. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* wisely pointed out that there really is no up or down with God—God is everywhere. The cardinal points and directions of any kind are not for Him. They’re for us. God is never lost; we generally are. Jesus ascended, not because that was the only way to return to the Father, but because Jesus wanted us to look upward and beyond, even as we look to the earth and to one another in the time we have. The question is not—*why is there suffering and loss?* The question is—*why is there a Saviour?* And the answer is grace. It is just grace. A gift. In season and out of season, when you feel like it and when you do not feel like it, whether you believe and receive or whether you do not believe and do not receive, the gift is there. The gift is God. God became like us to make us like Him—happy, complete, together. God saves—that is the name of Jesus! A Saviour was born; the Saviour is well and alive today, and He would make His home in your heart. The Saviour has given us eternal salvation. *Glory to the God in the highest!*