

THE DEATH OF JESUS IN LUKE...

When we read Luke's Passion account we can not some significant differences from the other gospels. In Luke, Jesus dies not with Psalm 22 but with Psalm 31. The Centurion is different. Mark records that "seeing the manner in which Jesus died, (screaming)", he said 'this is the Son of God'. Matthew records that the Centurion believed, "seeing the earthquake and all these things". In Luke, the Centurion is "led by all these events" to say, "This man is just" . This idea of justice or fellowship is one emphasis that is clearly strong, in Luke's Gospel.

More than the other Gospels, the connection between the way Jesus lived and the way he died, is most strong in Luke. The connection is particularly marked in the Passion narrative, where concern for justice or fellowship is highlighted. Jesus dies with a note of confidence, praying these words of Psalm 31 "Into your hands I commend my spirit". There is a lot of tension and cosmic turbulence, surrounding Jesus' death. There is darkness. The sun's light fails, and the temple curtain is torn before his death, not after it.

During the closing phase of his life it is significant that Jesus is reaching out. He heals the man who has his ear cut off by Peter in the garden at Gethsemane. This happens despite it being an act of ritual impurity to touch the bleeding part of the body. He forgave his executioners, he reached out to the thief in compassion and promised life in Paradise with him, and he comforted the women while carrying his cross. He thinks about other people and acts in a compassionate way, even in this time of his Passion.

Right throughout the Gospel and then in these Passion scenes the reader gets the message of Jesus being a boundary breaker. He plunges into people's pain and particularly responds to the one's who feel excluded, who feel that they don't have a part to play. He seems to have great rapport with the people who are broken or excluded.

This is relevant for our present church. Pain does not respect boundaries. It doesn't matter what social class a person comes from or to what race of people. Pain is a part of every culture, family and individual's lives. We all experience suffering and each of us will die. All sorts of literature reflects this experience. While we can protect ourselves against a great deal of physical pain today with various medications, there are all sorts of pain from which we cannot hide, and which we cannot prevent. Pain happens to everybody. In Luke's Gospel there is no exclusion as to who Jesus reaches out to. It is not just the poor people who Jesus assists. He helps anyone who suffers, no matter who they are.

On one occasion, Jesus said others were saying about him "if only he knew what sort of person he's mixing with, then he wouldn't do it." The Gospel adds "of course he knew who he was mixing with". Jesus deliberately chose this course of action. He was deliberately seeking out these sort of people. Often this was in contrast to the religious leaders who wanted to put limits on who could be healed, and when, because of the complex laws regarding ritual impurity. Jesus' words and his actions were consistently contrary to a legalistic mindset.

We don't often hear anybody speaking out so harshly against narrow-mindedness as Jesus did in his tirade in Luke and Matthew's Gospel. Jesus attacked the

religious leaders for putting the letter of the law before the needs of people. The religious leaders thought he had gone too far and they set out to do away with him. He was too disturbing.

In the Supper scene leading up to the Passion story, we have a description of the argument that arose among the disciples concerning who was the greatest. Jesus goes out of his way to proclaim that the greatest is the one that serves. These disciples had seen Jesus reach across the boundaries and look after the people that were excluded from true fellowship. Jesus died committed to those values, still pursuing that justice. For a Jew, any act between people that created fellowship was an act of justice. Any act that didn't create fellowship was an act of injustice. Jesus was a just man, a man who created fellowship.

The list of people that Jesus reached out to in Luke's Gospel is extensive. There's the demoniac at Capernaum, a man possessed by demons; there's Simon's mother-in-law who's suffering with a fever, whom he cures; there's the man who is 'full' of leprosy, whom Jesus touches, which was a forbidden act; there is the paralysed man whose friends could not get him close enough to Jesus, so they lowered him through the roof; there is the man in the synagogue with a withered arm who Jesus cured on the Sabbath; there is the slave of the Roman Centurion, whom he cured.

There is the son of the widow of Nain, who was probably the only provider for his mother, whom Jesus raises to life; there is the Gerasene demoniac living amongst the tombs, a wild character that no-one else can get near; there is Jairus' daughter and in that encounter Jesus raises her from the dead; there is the young boy, the only son, who is epileptic; there is the woman in the synagogue who is bent over, whom He calls 'daughter of Abraham'; there is the woman who has been haemorrhaging for 12 years and who she touches his cloak; there is the man with swollen legs and arms who is healed, in the house of a Pharisee on the Sabbath; there is a Samaritan leper (a doubly taboo person), one of the ten that he cures; there is a blind man, by the road at Jericho who hears the commotion going past and says "That's Jesus. take me out to him".

There were others like the woman who had let down her hair and washed his feet with it; Zacchaeus the tax collector; Mary Magdalene who had seven demons cast out. The list just goes on. It is no wonder the people flocked to him. People from all sorts of ways of life, across all sorts of boundaries, felt confident that this man would reach out, that he wouldn't exclude them. It is also no wonder that those in authority opposed him because the contrast between them was so stark. Those who followed him saw not only a man who preached goodness, but a person who acted.

The link between the cross and justice or fellowship, reminds us that we need to be taught the significance of the Passion by the people who suffer. We need to sit as learners before the people who suffer. They are the only people who can teach us.

Sometimes they don't have the right words. Often they have no words and if we try to use the 'right' language either in our advice, our counselling, our lectures or our sermons, all we do is create a big yawn; we say nothing to their hearts because we haven't sat with them and really listened.

I had a close friend who suffered an emotional breakdown. I hadn't seen her for about eight months and by then when I did, it was about eight weeks after the worst part of her breakdown. I went to see her in her home. She was normally a very bright bubbly person and I was amazed as I walked into the house to see the dramatic change in her. All of the blinds were drawn. She wore no make-up and she looked dreadful. She had no sparkle in her at all. I said hello and we sat down on a three-seater couch. There was nothing I could say. I could see the tremendous pain and the desperation or helplessness in her face. I only realised later that we sat there for five hours without saying another word. Every time I thought of saying something it seemed so stupid. She was suffering and I couldn't say anything that could change that.

Eventually I looked at my watch and realised I had to go. I said to her "I have to go" and she said to me "You really understand how I feel, you'll never know how much that helps the pain". I hadn't said a word but what she said was true. I did understand how she felt, I could feel the absolute desperation.

I had another experience like this. I received a phone call about 11.30 one night from one of our Family Group leaders. She said "Jim has been released from hospital; he tried to kill himself yesterday and he desperately wants to talk to you. Would you come over, I am so worried." I did go. It was a very similar experience sitting down with Jim. He too was normally a bright person but he had lost that. As is the case with many suicides, Jim didn't really want to end his life but he was in a trap and he didn't know where to get help. He felt embarrassed if friends knew what had happened to him. He thought himself a failure, a lost cause.

Sitting there listening to his pain, the blackness of any sort of solution, there was nothing that I could have said at that time that would have done anything except make that feeling worse. All I could do was to sit with the pain and listen to how he described it. This was in fact a healing experience. It started the process of his recovery.

When we listen to people who suffer and learn their language or non-language about what's going on, it enables us to really touch their hearts. This is what is so evident in Jesus' ministry. He was able to reach across to people who suffered. His great gift of compassion enabled him to reach out and embrace a leper without any hesitation.

Like Jesus, we have to be actively accessible to people not just as individuals but as a community, and as a church. Many people do not experience that. Either physically or spiritually, many feel excluded and not part of 'the body'. This could be because we've presented the body so beautifully that they feel that they could never be a part of it. They are too hurt and too broken. They don't look the right way and they don't believe they could fit in.

The church is full of ordinary who are weak and who fail. If ordinary people do not belong, who does? The crucified and disabled people need to be at home with us as they were in Jesus' presence. What was the blind man sitting by the roadside thinking and feeling? There was a commotion. Jesus of Nazareth was there. The blind man had heard about him. He must have thought "If I can only

get to him I know he'll reach out to me, he'll make me see again". Many people inside and outside the church yearn to experience that same healing.

It staggers me at times how many people in our society are totally dislocated, and don't feel they belong anywhere. Some of them move to another town, state, or province, so they don't belong to a neighbourhood, and they don't feel as if they belong in the church. An Indonesian man stood up at the end of a Passionist Family Group weekend in Auckland and asked if he could say something. He was very respectful and said a little prayer before he started. Then he said to the sixty or so people who were present that he was very nervous. He said, "There is something I would like to share with you about this weekend". He went on to say that he had been in New Zealand for twenty years having come from Indonesia, and he had joined every club he could think of that would help him integrate, especially the ones where he could use the language better and learn to speak.

He went to the Lions Club, he went to the Toastmasters Club so he could learn to publicly speak and he explained that he thought that it was his obligation as an immigrant to learn to speak the language of the people. And he said "I have tried that, but I've never felt that I belong and I've always felt that I'm a foreigner". He continued "I want to say that to you because you people are going to be ministering to people who feel the same way and it's a terrible feeling to be a foreigner because even in simple ways, you say something and people laugh at you and while they're all laughing you don't know what they are laughing at; they don't bring you into the conversation. People look at you in a funny way and some people turn away and treat you with contempt."

What Willie went on to say was "This weekend I have been with you people, just ordinary people, and for the first time in twenty years I feel like a bloody Kiwi". He said it was because people just accepted him and spent time with him whether it was sitting at a table instead of getting up and walking away or when he spoke, instead of ignoring him, asking him to say it again, so that they could understand him. This was very, very simple. No one did anything extraordinary. They just accepted him.

I was talking with a Filipino woman in a parish who has a child in the Catholic school. She asked one of the male parents outside the school, "Could you tell me the time?" and he stopped and looked her up and down, turned away and walked off. She doesn't speak English very well but she said she felt ignored and degraded. It is those people, foreigners sometimes, who will gift us so much as ministers. Those people who have lost their belief in themselves or never had self-worth, desperately need the belief of other people. We have to help create the environment or be the agents for people being accepted just the way they are.

Jesuit John Powell has a little saying. "All obnoxious qualities in human beings are really cries of pain". I have found that to be true every single time. When a person acts in a manner that we find annoying or frustrating, there is always a story behind their behaviour. All we need to do is find a way to have them tell their story. What does it feel like to be dying? What does it feel like to be excluded? What does it feel like to be unemployed? What does it feel like to be in your position. So many people don't get the chance to tell their story. When they do it releases their pain.

Since the Industrial Revolution there has been a tremendously increased strain on families. Leisure patterns have changed, and there are increased opportunities for travel. This has resulted in people living a long way from their relatives. Children grow up and move to the city or move to another country. In doing this, they move away from their basic support group, the people who really know them and love them, just as they are, through all the trials and troubles.

We know there's a high marriage breakdown rate and that has left many people feeling dislocated or desperate. In Australia there are two million households where people live on their own. There has been tremendously rapid change together with the influence of consumerism. People want the newest, the fastest, the brightest and the best. Television advertising suggests you've got to have something simply because it's new and therefore, supposedly better.

The throw-away and take-away mentality are much more than what they seem on the surface. The mentality starts off with products but creeps into relationships - throw away a person if they're no use to you, if they're not as exciting as they used to be, and take away what you want and get rid of it if its no longer productive.

Combined pressures like this have led to high level of stress for ordinary people trying to manage a family. If there's no support network around you how do you survive? When we establish Passionists Family Group we aim to have grandparents right down to young adults and children in each group. Unfortunately it is happening less nowadays. In one parish in a new suburb there were very few people aged over forty years old. There were no grandparents. One group at their request. was composed of quite young couples. They were unable to manage. They weren't able to be supportive. They were competitive and not open to learn from each other. They needed a few wise heads and their children needed grandparent figures.

Counselling has become a burgeoning profession. A lot of people are making a living on the fact that people are struggling, some of them with a very strong mentality of 'pain avoidance'. Many young people distract themselves from being alone. They avoid reflection on who they are and where their life is going. This results in over-activity, escape from facing hurt, escape from facing loneliness, escape from facing uncertainty, escape from facing the implications of illness and even escape from facing death. Often there is no-one to help those people, no-one around to just sit with them in their pain.

Since many people haven't learned how to face suffering and pain, when the first hint of major disagreement occurs in their marriage some want to give up. Kahlil Gibran says "the deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain". Many people have never had the opportunity to experience this truth because they've never allowed themselves to live through sorrow.

Many broken and hurt people can be helped by the things that Jesus offered. If people can be in an environment where they are accepted and loved as they are, then they can accept the hurts and struggles. If there is no-one around, if there is no encouragement, then it never happens. Some people don't need professional

help, they just need a friend. They need a supportive environment.

A major agenda for local churches is to provide an environment where people can be themselves. That is how God loves them, and how they need to be loved. Some people told me when we established the Passionist Family Groups in their parish, that the new group decided to have a "coffee and cheese night". One particular lady said she wouldn't be able to go because she never goes out at night. Her husband had died three years earlier and she hadn't been out at night since. None of the group knew this woman or her situation until then. She told them that she was 72 years old.

One couple responded, "We'll take you if you like. We'll pick you up and take you home". She went. When she got home she thanked them very much. The following afternoon the couple who took her decided to call around and check whether she had really enjoyed the outing. She admitted to them that she was lonely. She said "Do you know what I did today, I went to the hairdresser. That is the first time I've been to the hairdresser since my husband died. I've had a friend do my hair. I've been going to see a psychologist once every three weeks and I cancelled today. I don't need to see him anymore. I need what I had last night just some people that I can have a good time with that I can get support from, it's so simple". That was her own discovery. She realised it in less than twenty-four hours and she now had someone to share it with.

We have to do more than tolerate difference, we have to appreciate difference. We often find in people who are different from us, those who are regularly excluded, and yet they have such different gifts. We have to be prepared to be patient with those who have impaired hearing. A Passionist friend had deaf parents and I can 'sign' very slowly. A few years ago I was at the airport and a very tall fellow (he was a basket baller) who obviously was deaf, was trying to make some signals to the clerk making reservations for his ticket. I offered to help and very slowly was able to help him make his request for extra leg room. The kind lady that was making the reservations decided to do him a great favour and sit him next to me on the plane So he spent the whole trip communicating in sign language! It was very demanding, but I could see the delight on his face that someone was taking the time to speak his language.

A lot of people are frightened of what they don't understand and are threatened by people who are different. It is interesting in Luke's gospel that the story of the Good Samaritan is probably a bit more profound than we at first realise. When the lawyer is asked at the end which of these three helped out he doesn't say the Samaritan he says "the one who helped the man in need". He was really faced with a choice. Who do I identify with ? The priest? No that's not very pleasant, he hasn't done a very good thing, the Levite is the same. The Samaritan ? I can't identify with the Samaritan, I hate Samaritans! The last person he can identify with is this man who has been robbed and bashed. He is bleeding. The lawyer is forced to realise that if he is insensitive to this man on the road, he is insensitive to himself. Much as he hates to admit it, and he can't say 'the Samaritan', he knows that 'the one who helped him', is the one who proved himself to be a neighbour.

We have to get in touch with our own needs and our own sense of exclusion. Compassionate love is what we have to take to people. We need to be open to the

message of Luke's Passion account, including even the fact that when Jesus 'walking on the road' to Jerusalem, he was healing the man who lost his ear, consoling the women, forgiving the thief, forgiving the executioners, welcoming the thief and so on. Rules and regulations have no place here because compassion doesn't have any boundaries. Jesus is very much a boundary breaker plunging into people's pain regardless of what the rules and regulations say.

We are all faced with profound opportunities to say something that we have normally presumed. How do we say it. What can you say? In my own case before I was ordained and started preaching I had done a lot of catechetics. In those first years what I preached to people whenever I spoke about the Resurrection would have been purely on my studious reflections of what I believed, but that is not the case now. I owe this experience to the gift of my mother's death and I would just like to share something of that.

My mother died in 1983. She was the mother of eleven children. She contracted motor neurone disease and gradually lost muscle control, since the nerves from the brain cease to take messages to the muscles. Gradually she couldn't walk well and she certainly could not speak. There are other forms of motor neurone but her variety started mainly in the throat. She was restricted to writing notes over the last twelve months or more. She was a great letter writer so that wasn't so difficult for her.

The last time that I saw her in Sydney on June 20th of that year, I was going off to Adelaide to do some retreats. I was based in Melbourne at the time and I knew that she was getting worse. I said to her "I have a month of retreats to do in Adelaide and then I have some work in Melbourne and I'll be back here in early September, but I think I'll come back at the end of the work in Adelaide to see you around mid-July."

On the first night of the first retreat I received a phone call from my Father to say "Your Mother has turned much worse today and we've had to put her into hospital". I told him, "I'm doing a retreat, I'm the only priest here and if she looks like she's going to hold on I'll stay here until the retreat is finished and fly up to Sydney on Thursday." He agreed and said "I'll ring you tomorrow and we'll see if there is any change." He did this the next morning about 7.00am. He told me "The doctors think that your Mother won't last the day, so you'd better get back here."

I arranged for one of our other priests to come down in the afternoon and I left that morning. I had to fly via Melbourne and it turned out to be a very long day because the plane broke down in Melbourne. That's all you need in such circumstances! I left the camp site just out of Adelaide at 7.30am and got to Sydney at 6.00pm. At both Adelaide and Melbourne airports, I rang the hospital and was told "she's okay, she's in a coma now, everybody is here; the other children are here, your grandfather is there and she's waiting for you."

On the plane to Sydney I put the entertainment earphones on and the first song that was played was "Perhaps Love". There is a line in that song which never impressed me before, but it says "Some say love is holding on and some say letting go." I realised that's what my Mother was doing at the time. She'd been

letting go for quite some months and she was ready to die, but I knew she was holding on until I was there. One thing she said she hoped was that all her children would be there when she died. When I finally arrived we had Mass together and at the sign of peace everybody said goodbye to her. When the Mass was finished I invited Dad "Why don't you tell her to go". We all went outside while Dad spent those last minutes with her. He went home and about an hour later she died very peacefully.

The next night Dad asked us all to come home and have a meal and it was a night of story telling and there were many funny stories. One of them was a story that he didn't know about. When my youngest brother was about eight years of age he took one of my other brother's violin to school and finished up using it as a cricket bat. My mother found out, and like a lot of mothers she hid the broken violin from Dad. Quite often it was a joke with all of us that she'd hid this violin that was broken and he had never found out about it. Sometimes he'd say "I must get that violin out" and she would always change the subject! There were a lot of little stories like that.

After the funeral we again came back home, and as we sat around after our meal one of my brothers said, "Has anybody noticed that the chair where mother usually sat is empty?" This was about three hours after we first sat down. Without any deliberate plan, no one had sat in that chair. I had an uncle present who had told us a couple of days before that he hadn't been to church for thirty-five years or more and he was the first one to speak. He said "That chair isn't empty, your mother's spirit is alive in this family as much as it's ever been, I can feel it here in the songs that we've been singing and the stories you've been telling. It's just so alive".

My youngest sister then, who was about twenty-three at the time, asked if she could read a Bible passage to us and she went outside and brought in a Bible and she read the story to us of the disciples going to Emmaus. Now Therese has never done any scripture studies, in fact she'd been a semi-non churchgoer since she'd left school. When she'd finished reading she said "You know what I reckon, I don't think that when those two guys were walking along the road that Jesus actually came up like that story says. I think they were trying to find a way to describe what they were feeling and I think that what they were feeling is what we are feeling tonight. The more stories they told, the more real Jesus became to them.

They probably told stories like 'remember that time the woman was caught in adultery and how he stood up for her, yes wasn't that great; or the time he touched the leper; remember all those stories he told like "Blessed are the poor in spirit". Therese went on with quite a few examples and she said "I think they were doing what we're doing tonight. They were recalling the way his life had touched theirs and they suddenly realised that he hadn't gone anywhere, that he was alive in them" That opinion echoed around the room. My youngest brother, who was then seventeen, said "yes that explains something that I couldn't work out today."

"When I went to work the day after mother died, it was because that was what Mother would want me to do. When I decided to go to work I felt the happiest that I had ever felt and I couldn't explain it, but what you said helps me. I

remember thinking every other day I've ever been to school or to work when I'd come home, Mother was there at home. But I knew that she wouldn't be there today, she wasn't in one place. She was in me, in the way I talk, my sense of humour, the way I relate to people, she's become a part of me and always will be."

That was something we had celebrated in our funeral liturgy. Some months later one of my brothers played a song John Denver wrote when his Dad died, titled 'On the Wings of A Dream'. There is a line in that song which says "Though the singer is silent, there still is the truth of the song". That spirit of resurrection is something I have now experienced. It is the experience Luke and the other evangelists tried to capture. Resurrection happens when we lay our lives down for other people, when we cross the boundaries as Jesus did and bring people into fellowship. This is what Jesus' disciples came to know through his Passion and death.

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