

LOVE THROUGH SUFFERING

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LITTLE children, love one another.' Do we really love our neighbours as we should? And are we to love them as the world thinks we should? How often do we hear people accuse us of appearing to be unkind, or harsh or callous. 'Look here', they say, pointing out some case of social injustice, or one of hardship. 'Do you call that loving your neighbour?' And they scoff: 'Call yourselves followers of Christ?' One old man I met told me that he believed that organized religion was the prime cause of all the trouble in the world today. We try to console ourselves that these people fail to understand Christ's teaching, but if that is so we should surely try to enlighten them.

How are we to love our neighbour? Are we merely to visit him when he is sick, clothe him when he is naked, feed him when he is hungry? Indeed, this is by no means unimportant, but our Lord replies: 'Thus do the heathen and the publican.' There is more to it than that, it seems. It is because God is one and simple, and the wisdom of Christ is simple for those who have the faith to understand him, that the answer is simple. To love our neighbour is to assist him to perform God's will, who desired that all men should love him and obey him in all things. 'Yet', says Saint Paul, 'without grace we can do nothing.' We may want our fellows to possess life everlasting, but unless they first have grace within their souls our desire is vain. Unless we pray for them, as well as help them corporally, our words and example are no more than tinkling cymbal and sounding brass.

'And the Word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us.' God became man that he might perform as man, for mankind, an act that would be pleasing to the sight of God, as pleasing as the sin of Adam was displeasing to him. By this supreme act there was to be established once again peace between God and mankind. Yet this peace was not to be a negative thing, the peace when there is not enmity, it was to be that serene state of peace that exists between lovers; thus his biographers say of Saint Ignatius, that when he began to learn latin he was for ever practising *amo, amas*, which he was unable to conjugate further owing to his great understanding of the love that we should bear for God and God bears for us. This was to be a benevolent peace bringing with it

the grace of God, which is no less than the manifestation of God's benevolence upon a soul. Thus 'Grace and Peace to you' is Saint Paul's favourite greeting, and the angels song of the peace that was now to exist between God and man by the birth of the Infant at Bethlehem.

But although Christ became man in order to perform as man and for mankind the supreme sacrifice, he did not withhold from us the opportunity of sharing in the work of the redemption. We know that the purpose of man's existence is to do God's will in all things, that God alone is his true end. Yet man, ever since Adam had chosen to follow his own will in defiance of the will of God, had fallen disastrously short of this ideal condition. But Christ fulfilled perfectly, during every moment of his earthly life, the purpose of his manhood, which is the true purpose of *our* manhood, never deviating for a moment, even on Calvary which was the final and supreme test of his adherence, from the path of love for, and obedience to, Almighty God. Thus he merited supremely for mankind peace with God and the grace to perform those meritorious works which win for ourselves eternal salvation. Yet even this is not all, for Saint Thomas says that as a man in the state of grace (having on a wedding garment, as Christ says), fulfils the will of God, so God fulfils the will of that man in the salvation of another. In this way the just are able to acquire for others, not necessarily only for those who are themselves in a state of grace, either, but even for sinners, the graces which they need for salvation.

God will answer our prayers in the measure of our adherence to him, yet even more so when it is in the face of sufferings, both mental and corporal: thus Christ suffered both the bodily sufferings of the scourging, and the mental anguish of the mock crowning with thorns and the derision of the soldiery. One can more easily remain devoted to the will of God, by grace, when all is well, but it is when everything seems up against us that we should offer ourselves to him in order to draw, by the virtue of our allegiance, grace down upon mankind. Thus loving our neighbour becomes something vital, growing more dramatic and powerful in quality as our loving attachment grows and our sufferings try us more and more: reaching its climax in death if needs be: 'There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.' So Mary suffered much and offered all. While her

Son was offering the supreme sacrifice to atone for the sins of mankind she offered to God her allegiance, to a Father who was permitting so much pain and anguish to hurt her Child. It was this adhesion to God in the face of what seemed a supreme defeat that moved the divine Justice to pour forth upon the world the grace his Son was winning. One may say, I think, that while Jesus atoned, Mary also merited for mankind. Thus Christ had said: 'Rather blessed are they who do the will of my Father.' He meant that Mary had a far greater title than mother of the carpenter of Nazareth, which is what the crowd mistook her for. She was the perfect Mother of the perfect Son, who adhered to God as completely as her Son suffered profoundly. How many mothers would have rebelled against God for allowing such a cruel death to be the lot of their sons, and as unjust as the death of Calvary! Yet in hating God they would be sinning: falling short of that destiny which is mankind's—to adhere to God 'all the days of our life'. Not so Mary, she remained faithful, for had she not offered her Son to God when on the eighth day she took him to be circumcised—to be signed with the sign of God's covenant? 'And this shall be a sign between us' said God to Abraham. Mary does not retract her decision, but offers her sorrows to the Father in order to draw grace down upon mankind. This is her triumph; we can make it ours. This is love of our neighbour, par excellence.

In spite then of personal tragedies, in spite of sickness, in spite of corporal and spiritual destitution, we must remain attached to God, for that is our destiny. This is the way to merit for ourselves, and for our neighbours, the way chosen by the saints. Saint Thérèse said as she was dying: 'I did not know that it was possible to suffer so much', and the result of that suffering may be seen today in the multitudes of the faithful who have received help as a result of her intercession, and those who were without the faith and have it now, through her. So particularly in the work of the lay apostolate when one experiences mental and spiritual difficulties and frustrations, they can be offered up, fuel for the flames of the Church's powerhouse.

Christ remained faithful to his Father for grace; we must remain faithful in order to wrest that grace down. Christ suffers alone because he alone is worthy to offer up the supreme sacrifice to God, while we his Church, his Kingdom, his mystical Body, suffer in him, with Mary: *per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso*.