

One Paschal Journey

Imagine how Abraham felt when God put him to the test (Gen 22). The story does not tell us what he told Sarah – probably nothing. How could he tell her that God asked him to offer up Isaac as a holocaust? She would have gone ballistic, so he said nothing. He walked to the land of Moriah in intense loneliness.

What God had asked of him was incomprehensible! Why would God ask him to sacrifice Isaac? He was the ultimate blessing which God bestowed upon Abraham and Sarah when they were unable to conceive. Isaac was the sign of God's faithful love. The command to offer him as a sacrifice left Abraham perplexed. It was like hearing God say, *"I take back everything that I promised you with Isaac."* Abraham felt alone. Meanwhile, Sarah was left alone in agony at home, who with a mother's intuition must have sensed that something was wrong.

In the same way, there are times when we feel alone, especially in sickness or suffering, like when parents suffer the death of their child. Or it might be when we stand against the crowd and are at odds with society. It can feel like no one understands what we are going through. At the same time, we can feel distant from God, or perplexed why God allows suffering. We can feel all alone. Do not trust those feelings, because you are never alone. This is one of the main lessons in Scripture. We might *feel* alone in the spiritual life, but we are never alone.

At the end of the story, Abraham's relationship with God was strengthened. God reassured him of the original promise. He said, ***"Because you acted as you did ... I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands on the seashore ... in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing"*** (Gn. 22:17-18). When we walk by faith, God is with us, even in the darkest times, especially then. Not only that but God uses our suffering to bless others.

God is always close to us in the darkness, and he uses our suffering to bless others. Abraham never saw how his faith would benefit others. Nor did he realize that his faith in handing over his son Isaac to be sacrificed would be seen as foreshadowing how God would hand over his Son. That is why we hear this story during Lent. It prefigures the handing over of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb.

As St. Paul wrote, ***"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?"*** (Rm. 8:31-32). Paul invites us to marvel at Jesus' suffering. It proves that God's love is unstoppable.

In the next verses Paul declares that God's love applies to the darkest times in life. ***"Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ – can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence? ... No, we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us"*** (Rm. 8:35,37). Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ? Can Covid-19, or unemployment, or cancer, or any kind of sickness, or any tragedy? No. Not only will we come through times of suffering victorious, but also, God will use our suffering to bless others.

This was the "takeaway" for the disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2-10). Immediately before this, Jesus told them that he was destined to suffer and die. That seemed impossible to the disciples. It threw them into turmoil. St. Paul named this the "scandal of the cross." Peter rebuked Jesus and insisted that he must never suffer like that (Mk. 8:32; Mt. 16:22).

But seeing Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain was a sign that his suffering and death would end in glory. This does not only apply to Jesus, but also to us. By our baptism, we are members of his Body, so his destiny is our destiny. We are destined to suffer and to share in his glory. For Christians, the cross is the only way to glory.

We are on one paschal journey with Christ. Every Lent, we journey with him on the way of the cross, which leads to the resurrection. As the Body of Christ, the Church is on one paschal journey. Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection is the paradigm of the Christian life. The paschal mystery is how we are to interpret every event in life.

St. Paul helps us understand this in the letter to the Romans. He wrote, ***"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us"*** (Rm. 8:18). In his letter to the Colossians, he says: ***"For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory"*** (Col. 3:3-4).

We are on one paschal journey *with* Christ and *in* Christ. We are never alone. We are 'in Christ' but also 'in communion' with all the baptized. So often, we are not aware of that mystery, or we feel alone. But the deepest truth is that we share one paschal journey – suffering, dying, and rising with the entire Body of Christ.

In a book of prayer exercises that I use, the author's opening comments remind me that whatever benefit that I experience in prayer is not just for me, but for the whole world. The author wrote this: "Before you start a prayer exercise you must always give yourself some time to seek this disposition: that you embark upon the exercise not for yourself alone but for the welfare of creation, of which you are a part, and that any transformation you experience will redound to the benefit of the world."

We are on one paschal journey. We are never alone when we suffer; rather, God uses our suffering to bless others. Our discipline of daily prayer helps to transform the whole world. How we act and how we speak is transformative for the universe. Our suffering is beneficial for others. Why? Because we are united to Christ and, through him, to one another.

"Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ – can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence? ... No, we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us." Not only do we come through them victorious, but we help others to come through suffering to glory in Christ. Like Abraham, all the nations of the earth will find blessing in us.

What a blessing to be on one paschal journey! Walking in Christ and in communion with each other. Here is the challenging part. Covid-19 has unmasked how selfish and petty we can be with one another. Recent political events have revealed how angry and divided we are, how poorly we treat one another. We have so far to go, if we are to live as one Body in Christ on one paschal journey. Christians are called to be a leaven of Light in the world, but often we are no different than others.

Yet, the steadfast patient love of God is greater than our weakness. The Eucharist is a mystical presence that is transforming us into the real presence of Christ. Ask for that grace as you journey through Lent. Remember that we share one paschal journey.