

Faith and Pain

Gospel: Mark 9:17-31 AV: *And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me. And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things [are] possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, [Thou] dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him. And [the spirit] cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose. And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting. And they departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and he would not that any man should know [it]. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day.*

"This kind can come forth by nothing,
but by prayer and fasting."

The event we heard in this Gospel message today depicts a daily scene from our contemporary life, Christ confronting the man suffering from the devil. To one side stood the disciples and the father of the child, unable by their faith -defined as weak by Jesus- to save the child. This scene of the child represents an actual picture from most of our contemporary societies and cultures. The characteristics of this child are violence and ugliness. The devil dominating the child often threw him violently in the fire. The devil also made him antisocial, dumb and deaf. There is no uglier picture than the scene of this child foaming and gnashing his teeth on the ground, taking away his human dignity.

In our contemporary civilizations, violence is wide spread. Even though the conscience of our civilization carries much of Christian values, it still has not reached the Christian view of civilization. Sexual violence invalidates human love and throws man into the enjoyment of temporary animal pleasures. All this is at the expense of the beauty of the sanctified relationship between a couple. The media, educational curricula, programs and the entertainment facilities need to be infused with much Christian education built on peace and beauty.

Political violence is also spread in many parts of the earth, repressing not just the freedom of thought, but also the dignity of the human body. Political prisons hold the ugliest "human" treatment, if we may call it human.

Social violence widens the gap between different social classes. One class increases in richness and boldness, and another in need and misery. The picture of a struggling society carries much ugliness that negates all social beauty and fraternity. Violence is everywhere staining life without any meekness or beauty.

What is the position of the Christian, who is filled with love and faith, vis-à-vis the domination of these evil attacks, not just against "a torn child," but also against whole societies and people?

We, Christians, may not be luckier than this "father of the child," confessing our incapacity and weak faith, petitioning the Lord and saying, "If you can do anything Lord to our world and our pain, have pity on us and save us." We faithful often feel that the spread of spiritual epidemics in the body of humanity has become a deadly cancer. And surely, one stands hopeless and miserable facing the fads of this age, human pain and suffering, as if our condition does not allow us to act in any way. The only remaining help for us is this sentence, "If you can do anything Lord, hasten to rescue us."

The answer of Christ regarding our latter position is summarized in His words to the father of the child. The matter is not impossible, and exorcism is not greater than the power of the disciples. It is only the specialty of the Master. The doors for solving our problems in this age are not closed. So we ought not to just put it on the Lord's shoulders. The secret of the subject here is that we are His disciples, but we are a difficult generation, unbearable, unbelieving, and weak in faith.

Our faith is often built on religious and Christian superficialities. We consider ourselves faithful when we

practice certain religious rituals, without missing certain liturgical practices. And as it is commonly said, "The essence of religion is service." We feel that we will give our Lord His right, and we are really pious when we have good conduct, or what we call Christian conduct. This Christian conduct contains a lot of social services and civic work, respect and many Christian social virtues that are important and ideal. On the other hand, we think of prayer as a secondary work or of less importance. The same for fasting. For as it is said, religion is giving good service to others and good conduct is the important thing.

We can be realistic: even if we believe in these virtues, rarely do we adhere and follow them. If we think that moral conduct is the essence, this leaves us without the two most important virtues that are prayer and fasting.

Christ calls faith such as this lacking and weak. Faith such as this, as defined by the Gospel today, is not for confronting contemporary challenges. Faith without prayer and fasting is superficial and artificial without any result. Good conduct does not negate prayer and fasting. Instead it has to build on them. Good conduct ought to be their fruit.

How can we then install peace and beauty in a land full of violence and ugliness? We cannot do so except through prayer and fasting.

Prayer, as defined by St. John Climacus whose memory we celebrate today - the fourth Sunday of Lent - is fellowship with God. Man is always a wondering person, worried, and outside of this fellowship. St. Augustine says: "You have created us, O Lord, inclined to you, and we will not rest except in you." Prayer is the

source of inner peace even if we are in the middle of all worldly troubles. The Lord promised, saying, "Do not be afraid O little flock," and "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." These promises are the source of peace for our world. We do not fear and are not shaken, "For God is with us."

Fasting builds in us a proper view of beauty. Our world is a world of laxity, a world of deceitful beauties, and the deceitfulness of the eye, of food, of pleasure, and the like. We are in a time during which we need to fast more than ever. For licentiousness and the deceitfulness of worldly beauties are wide spread. Who or what will reform our understanding, showing chastity in marriage more admirable than the enjoyment of pleasures, ideal human dealings more beautiful than base selfishness, and the Divine Word more delightful than honey? What will do this except fasting? Fasting is the proper education for forming beauty in man. The ugliness of violence cannot be eliminated except by the meekness of fasting.

Prayer installs in us inner peace, connects us peacefully to our neighbor, and pushes us to aid others, being makers of peace. Fasting returns to ourselves our initial beauty so man can see his beauty in things divine rather than earthly. Prayer and fasting can expel the evil of violence and its ugliness.

This kind cannot go out from our civilizations except by faith built on prayer and fasting.

Amen.