

Sunday.29

This past week a small group of people gathered to renew acquaintances and relive their past. Thirty or more years ago they had been members of a Catholic community which celebrated Mass together each Sunday at a beautiful chapel on the campus of a Jesuit prep school. This community had come to be a community in great part because a William Gibson, the author of the play “The Miracle Worker,” has written a Passion play to be performed in the campus chapel by the members of this community. They rehearsed two or three nights a week in January and February in the chapel, which was freezing, in order to have the play ready for presentation towards the end of Lent, and it was that hard, even almost painful, experience which cemented their communal identity.

These same people, now in their seventies, reflected last week on that part of their lives and on their lives in general. One woman summed up her faith journey by saying that she felt that life is an emptying-out process. God empties us out. Out of what? Of ourselves, of our selfish selves. He does that so as to make room for Himself in us. Therefore, the process can be looked at in two different ways. The emptying out part is painful, but the filling in

part is beautiful. To use a very familiar image, God must crack a few eggs to make an omelet.

Our lives can be very busy. From our earliest days all sorts of demands are made upon us. In childhood there are rules to be observed and subjects to be learned. Then there is adulthood and with it family responsibilities. All these demands and obligations take us out of ourselves, and that is good. Without even noticing it we become other-oriented. The narcissism of the child is conquered by the care of the adult for the other, whether it is wife or child, parent or friend. Then, in old age, we lose family and friends, we lose health and independence, we lose mobility of body and flexibility of mind. We are, as is often said, diminished. This is the emptying out process. It is a sad one. It is especially sad for those who don't see this process as having any positive side, who don't believe in God and don't see all this as a means God is using to fill us with Himself, with His own life and love. And even for those who do believe the process is still what it is: a time of purgation, a time of loss, a time of self-emptying.

The woman who was saying all this has herself suffered. She had lost a twenty-year old son. He was flying. Neither the plane nor his body were ever found. She has also suffered physical sickness. But

she is at the moment well and working. But while she was saying all this, the woman sitting next to her, now in her eighties, was even more dramatically diminished. She has suffered a stroke and no longer has the use of one arm. I was wondering what she was thinking while the other woman was talking. Was she saying to herself: "Tell me about it!" In a way she could have said that. She could even have been bitter. "Why," she could have said to herself, "is she talking about diminishment when she is still able to get around and even work? Wait until she is in my position." But when I spoke to this second woman afterwards, those thoughts and words were far from her. She was instead thanking God for all the blessings of her life, both in earlier days and even now.

There is no comparing joys and sorrows. They differ for each of us, and what might be a big thing, a great suffering, for one person is almost something unnoticed for another person. Yet all of us, in one way or another, experience suffering. For some the sufferings are those of the heart; for others they are physical sufferings. Most people have both, but in different depths. But the point of today's readings is to tell us that we are not alone in our sufferings. God suffers with us. A famous Protestant theologian and preacher, William Sloane Coffin, the pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City in the 1970s, lost a son in an automobile accident. When

someone tried to console him by saying, “It is God’s will,” Coffin thundered, “The hell it is. When my boy was killed, God was the first who cried.” I think Coffin was right. I think that is what our second reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews is telling us. Speaking of Jesus the writer says: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way....” If we take those two negatives, “do not have and is unable,” and make them positives, the sentence says more simply: “We have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses.”

“Tested in every way,” the text says. Someone could object that this is not literally true. For example, Jesus did not experience the diminishments that come with aging. He died young. On the other hand, he was an adult who experienced all the pains an adult can experience, both emotionally and physically. That fact may justify this phrase, “tested in every way.” All this is for our consolation and strength. We can turn to Jesus in our sufferings and diminishments, whatever their nature may be, because we know he can and will share them with us and because he has walked this path before us.

There is an image used in John's Gospel which may serve us in taking today's readings to heart. It is a resurrection scene in ch. 21, vv 18-19, of this Gospel. There Jesus says to Peter: "Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, 'Follow me.'"

May we stretch out our hands to the Lord in acceptance of his will for us! May we anticipate our future sufferings, even our deaths, by accepting them now with outstretched hands because we believe that the Lord Jesus will grasp our hands and take us to himself and life with the Father. "Follow me."