

IT'S NOT OVER YET

Christological Reflections on Holy Week

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This doctrine of the cross is sheer folly to those on their way to ruin, but to us who are on the way to salvation it is the power of God. Jews call for miracles, Greeks look for wisdom; but we proclaim Christ - yes, Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Greeks, yet to those who have heard his call, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1Cor. 1:18, 23-24

MONDAY: A Crucified God

What is demanded of us is honesty. The world has not changed in two thousand years. Event for event, you can find in our contemporary world perfect parallels to every moment in this Gospel story of the Passion. But this is difficult for us to admit.

If there is a typically bourgeois virtue it must be the cult of moderation. The extreme is to be abhorred; it is a matter of unseemly exaggeration. We cannot bear too much reality. The world is to be thought of as a place where comfortable mediocrity rules, where everything is under control and there is nothing to be horrified about, either in ourselves or in our world. This is our necessary lie. What we deny under our veneer of a smoothly reasonable world are the real dimensions of life and history.

Understandably, we project a God who will be compatible with this comforting view of life and history. We think God in our own image and likeness.

By contrast, the Gospel categories are not moderate at all but starkly and fearfully opposed - life and death, luxury and starvation. The cross of Jesus achieves its true stature perceived within a world conceived in this stark fashion. Without such a perception of our world, we cannot do justice to the cross of Jesus. More profoundly, without a willingness to allow our image of God to emerge out of the cross, we will certainly miss the deepest truth of the Gospel.

If we analyze ourselves, we find a tendency to take on the cross with horror out of our

presumed moderate world. It is barbaric and we have left all that behind us in the twentieth century. Part of our unease in Holy Week is our repressed outrage at the barbaric horror that we are being asked to focus on through the cold actuality of the written description of what transpired. The Gospels are unbelievably unsentimental and starkly simple. They do not embroider and they do not exaggerate. We, on the other hand, are habitually repressing something.

We make of the Gospel story something extraordinary, exceptional. But the real message is not simply that this terrible thing happened to Jesus. It is that this is always what happens to real love in the world as we have made it. Many are happy to proclaim the world a bad place. They neglect their complicity in making it that way. We like to assume that we believe in God and Jesus and love but confronted with real love we are threatened and experience it as terrifying demand. When we meet love, we kill love. And we will only stop doing this when we are seduced by the Beauty that can overcome our fear. We encounter this Beauty in the story of Jesus' life, passion and death. Rather, we will encounter it there if we stop pretending that our idea of God is not what is at stake in this story, and stop asking why God - the God whom we presume to know independently of the story - did not 'do something.' God is the issue: our way to life depends on whether we can reconceive Divine Wisdom, Strength, Love in and through the story of Jesus.

Bishop Taylor tells of a young couple to whom he was called whose two-year old child had just died, a victim of cot death. This name is reserved for those deaths in sleep of little children for which no cause can be identified. This is harder to bear than anything else. In an accident, at least we understand how it happened. But there is a meaninglessness involved in the cot death that attacks our deep conviction that life must be meaningful somehow.

He writes of his unwillingness to talk to the couple of God's inscrutable purposes. In fact, what he told the couple was that the death of their child was as great a tragedy for God as it was for them. How could he say that? The easy – or desperate invocation of God's Providence to provide a comforting answer seems so much more orthodox.

What we habitually ignore is the dimension of unavoidable pain and suffering that belongs to a material universe. We have slowly come to learn over centuries of effort to understand that the only intelligibility to be found in our universe is that of emergent probability. For every successful breakthrough of life there are countless dead-ends. This means that the whole process of emerging life in God's world is one involving enormous costs. This explains the enormous time range that belongs to the process, fifteen to twenty thousand million years in terms of our current knowledge. The randomness which attaches to the confluence of so many causal factors makes for tragedy. Those who ask why God does not intervene with miracle if God cares do not understand that they are demanding a universe which would then be forever unknowable and humanly unlivable since what they are requesting would involve the elimination of the only intrinsic intelligibility a material universe could have.

If God wishes a material universe - and most of us most of the time are happy enough that God does - God must allow the pain and frustration of that universe. If God's creation is to result in flesh and blood people capable of freely responding to love with love, then God must be 'helpless' in the face of tragedies like cot deaths. We have no reason to say that God is less involved in the pain of the- tragedy than the parents are. If we take the cross of Jesus seriously as the revelation of God, we have every reason to say the opposite.

Jesus never suggests that he expected everything to go smoothly for him in this world just because he knew the Father loved him. We do not find him asking for things to be rearranged just for his own benefit. the temptation stories indicate his attitude to that. But once, in real fear, he prayed, "Father, if it be possible ..." only to discover that it was not possible.

We read how his realization of this in prayer strengthened him and he was able to carry on. We fear to examine what this might mean, that it was not possible. Like him, we realize that we are thus thrown back on our own responsibility for the world. Our comforting image of omnipotent deity is shattered. To be human is to be invited to enter

into the pain of the world and to take responsibility for minimizing that pain.

Sin in us is when we look at the world with something less than love and find it too terrifying. Our withdrawal in self-protection, saying 'No' to life at all kinds of levels, comes from an inchoate feeling that this is a terrible scene to be involved in. The levels of rise and consequent vulnerability, the enormity of evil - we are not quite sure we want to be part of this. If with the tradition we want to say that there is a resolution to our problem in the form of Jesus, we have to come to see that the only resolution lies in our becoming reconciled to God as God really is; a God whose omnipotence is not to be conceived as the power to change the way the world is in spite of everyone and everything; a God whose power is manifest primarily as the infinite vulnerability of Infinite Love.

Jesus' prayer was met with silence. No reply. But no reply was possible. Perhaps at least a word of comfort could have been offered? With that we are back in the category of cheap emotions. It would have been meaningless: there is no comforting word conceivable in the context in which Jesus found himself. It would have been a lie. So there is only silence.

Paul does not minimize the scandal. The truth of God that is revealed in the suffering and death of Jesus

- Is not God as we think God
- is none of the things in which we take pride
- is none of the things on which we pin our hope
- corresponds to none of the values by which we structure our world.

It is, in fact, utter foolishness to our wisdom. What we struggle with this week is a monumental inversion of values, a turning the world upside-down. It goes like this: we, in our resentment at life, have created a crucifying world, a world where any who really love get killed; Jesus, the Power and the Wisdom of the God who is Love, shows us how life is to be loved and how life is to be lived. I do not think that we will ever stop making the crucifying world until we see the face of God in the crucified Jesus. We

need to be seduced by the beauty of that Truth. And by the beauty of the human vocation. God suffers God's universe in love so that there will be a response in love. Only thus can what is most precious to God - a free response to life in love emerge. Our only meaning lies in being able to say yes to life and the universe has been 'waiting', moving towards our response, for twenty thousand million years.

To enter into the passion and death of Jesus is, then, to begin to discover the nature of God's involvement in God's universe and to experience the invitation to share in that involvement. What dissolves our fear in love is the discovery of the truth, of the Mystery present at the birth of the galaxies and at the birth of our earth: present with an infinite cherishing deeper than any involvement of suffering that we can imagine.' This truth of the Mystery is only available to us if we can read the story of Jesus as God's story.

Any focus on the passion and death of Jesus which fails to lead people into the truth of the Father is a sad missing of the point. There are other things to be struggled with during this week but none as crucial as this to the life of faith. R.S. Thomas is a Welshman whose poetry over the last few decades has been a moving testimony to the unending struggle in us between faith and doubt. Here are some lines of his:

And in the book I read
God is love – But lifting
my head, I do not find it
so ...

... One thing I have asked
Of the disposer of the issues
Of life: that truth should defer
To beauty. It was not granted.

Most of us could easily identify with Thomas' sentiments. We have certain expectations aroused by the concept of a loving and caring God. We find these expectations

contradicted in history. Perhaps we have forgotten the Gospel source of the concept and the experience that gave rise to it in the first place. It is not enough to read in the Book' the statement 'God is love': we must enter into the story to discover just what that might mean. It may be that then, as we discover the truth of the Mystery in history, our expectations will be drastically modified.

We are challenged to a deeper involvement in for fruitful entry into the suffering of our world as a needed step into the Passion story. It now appears that we are being invited to an openness towards God's involvement in the suffering of our world as an equally necessary step. It may be that progress in the second step makes possible our progress in the first step; that a glimpse of the true wisdom and power of God as this appears in the story of Jesus frees us into the compassion of our human vocation.

The men who were guarding Jesus mocked at him.
They beat him, they blindfolded him, and they kept
asking him, 'Now, Prophet, who hit you? Tell us that.'
And so they went on heaping insults upon him. ...

There were two others with him,
criminals who were being led away to execution;
and when they reached the
place called The Skull,
they crucified him there, and the criminals with him,
one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said,
'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing'.

Luke 22:63-65; 23:32-34

TUESDAY: The Mystery of Evil

A fragment of a prayer of Huub Oosterhuis lingers in my mind:

Lord God, we see the sins of the world in the light of your only son.
Since his coming to be your mercy toward us we have come to suspect
how hard and unrelenting we are toward each other...

It is in the light of his coming that the real dimension evil that imprisons us and that we
perpetrate on each other can be frighteningly explored. I drew attention already to the
starkly simple language of the passion narratives. The writers do exaggerate for
emotional effect. What we find then is read as literary embellishment. And what we find
is an extraordinary amount of unbridled hostility and hatred to victim. How is this to be
understood and what light does it throw on the cycles of evil in which we find ourselves
caught into this is, once again, to bring the passion narrative into connection with

everything else we know of our world.

John V. Taylor suggests that a relevant starting-point might be a perusal of the reports of Amnesty International we will discover that every day, throughout our world effective blessing of governments, helpless women are being tortured and brutalized, apparently for no other reason than that are helpless and at the mercy of those power over them. There must be more going on and if will look more searchingly into our own hearts we may discover what it is. If we are to read the words of Jesus in v.34 above more than love trying to make excuses where there is any excuses, there must be room for an insight into us which he possessed.

Some years ago, Sebastian Moore suggested that reading John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* allowed the English reading public to recover a sense of original sin. The novel communicated well how simply maintaining the reasonable status quo is what brings death to the innocent. Our normal stereotypes of good and evil are hardly adequate to the truth. It was, after all, the respectable establishment of church and state that carried out the judicial murder of Jesus.

Familiarity can blind us to the obvious so that it takes an artist to enable us to see again. As cover illustration for his *Yes To God*, Alan Ecclestone featured a picture of a steel sculpture by Louis Osman. The original stands two meters tall. At first glance it is a cross with a circle. We then see that the circle has jagged teeth, that the vertical beam supports two powerful steel springs which attach to one half of the circle and would cause it to snap shut on the other half were it not for the restraining trigger, the palm frond. We are looking at a carefully made machine, designed like a bear trap. But this, the artist tells us, is a man trap. It is designed to cut in two any human being who reaches for the palm frond (John 12:13), who reaches for a world without domination or exploitation. It is the frightening instrument whereby a society maintains its 'law and order' against those who long for a more humane order.

We are helped by the artist to realize again the historical function and reality of the cross within the Roman Empire. The cross was an instrument of death by torture. Its public

dimension gives the clue to its functioning. As the most humiliating and painful way of killing that could be devised, it was meant to demonstrate the total power of the Roman state and its radical intolerance of any who failed to appreciate the benefits of the Pax Romana.

But it is not the Roman state which we need to have in focus. All human societies tend to protect their version of the human against subversive criticism: all have their mantraps. And the savagery of their reprisal on the victims is what we need to understand. Whence this excess of hatred for the helpless victim? It is there in the passion story and in the files of Amnesty: we apparently hate the victim for being victim. What might that say?

The fury of the torturer ends with the breakdown of the victim, whether this break-down takes the form of raging anger or whimpering submission. It seems that the rage of the torturer is evoked only as long as the victim remains unbroken. In his/her non-retaliation in hatred the victim remains human, continues to offer a human relationship to the torturer. In making this offer, the victim is shown to be stronger than the torturer, more willing (in sheer helpless victimhood) to bear the cost of promoting a more human world. And it is this truth of the situation that arouses such fury. The victim, willing or unwilling representative of a truer humanity, though helpless, stands in judgment on our sell-out of humanity, a sell-out due to our fear of the cost. The victim confronts us with the humanity we have suppressed within ourselves. It is an intolerable situation.

To have another in your power is to be in a position of shame as a human being. We both want this power and resent the shame. Of course, we must hate the victim for being victim, whether it be the poor person in our locality or the majority of our fellow human beings who are condemned to be losers in the competitive world of our making.

On this reading, the more truly innocent the victim the greater the animosity that will be occasioned in us, since we are undergoing a more radical and intolerable condemnation. I find that I cannot imagine the soldiers treating Barabbas as they did Jesus. They have

reason to hate this man who is willing to fight and kill them. But, now that he is in their power, he does not provoke the kind of hatred we see displayed toward Jesus. We assume that we hate people because of the harm they do or can do to us: it may be the case that we hate people much more because of the harm *we do to them*.

In the light of this, the choice of Barabbas over Jesus should not amaze us. It is entirely predictable. Barabbas is not a problem. He is, of course, dangerous, but we have the army, police, prisons. In all he says and does Barabbas justifies us to ourselves. He justifies Pilate in exercising the kind of power Pilate exercises: Pilate needs people like Barabbas to justify himself. Barabbas justifies the rest of us in his wanting basically the kind of thing we want. Barabbas would change the actors but not the basic power relationships of our world. Jesus, on the other hand, confronts us with the demands of the humanity we have long ago sacrificed on the altars of expediency. Of the two, Barabbas will elicit much less hostility from us. The weakness of God, mediated through a human sufferer, is more threatening to us than any human power.

The Gospel story also speaks of the role of the mob in the passion of Jesus. The mob is unthinking, easily manipulated. But its animosity must also be investigated. They probably had no idea of what Jesus was about; all that they could see was that he had run foul of the system. This was the self-same system that was oppressing them. Yet they shouted “Crucify him!” They do to him what the system was doing to them. Without understanding? Perhaps, to some extent. But, even if they had understood, they would still have done it. It is less terrifying to put up with the evil we know than to face the vulnerability of being simply human.

All of this says much about the nature of evil. The paradigm of sin which governs the Bible is “settling for the flesh-pots of Egypt.” It is the refusal to move on towards true freedom. Within this model, it is easy to see how the greatest evil is perpetrated in our choice of the good. In our choice of what we will define as worthwhile, we set up what will be institutionalized, defended to the death. Our institutions, including our religious institutions, created to promote life, end up promoting death. Instead of openness to the summons contained in the presence of victims to judge differently and to go beyond

what we have already instituted, we blame the victim for being victim.

John Taylor suggests that it is possible and necessary to probe deeper still into the sources of our hate and aggression. With whom, he asks, are we habitually angry in an inner rage which we fear to admit? Our anger is really directed against life itself and the Giver of life. Corresponding to those embodiments of historical fear and hate that we call military-industrial complexes are complexes of anger and hurt within, fed by our daily resentment at our wasted lives, our sense of helpless futility in the face of what life demands. The one we hate is the One responsible for making life like this: God.

We do not easily admit to hating God. This prevents us from being in touch with the source and extent of our hardness of heart, our inability to accept the human when we meet it. The concern of the Gospel revelation is to reconcile us to God, we who have never forgiven God for making us the vulnerable human beings we are.

So Jesus is not making excuses for us in this word from the cross. He is naming the unconscious movement of evil in us to put us in touch. Since he does it without condemnation, we are enabled to face the source, the self-crucifixion of life-in-us that leads to the crucifixion of life-in-others.

To enter into the Gospel story of what happened to Jesus is to be led to identify in ourselves the evil which we see in others. Far from undermining our struggle against evil, this self-knowledge is what empowers creative struggle against evil. Creative struggle is grounded in solidarity and compassion, a compassion which understands that in oppressors which makes them such, a compassion grounded in self-knowledge.

That next step, I think, is possible if we allow ourselves to be moved by the truth of a Love which is so committed to creation that it is willing to suffer everything for the sake of creation, a love which gives in such irrevocable fashion that for God there is no possibility of going back. We need to be so affected by this Love that we can stop resenting the human condition and the Giver of life. We may even come to cherish creation, including the vulnerable poverty of being human. We may even come to live

from love/forgiveness and then we would no longer need to blame the victim for being victim.

*In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord
seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the skirt of his robe
filled the temple. About him were attendant Seraphim ...*

*And, as each One called, the threshold shook to its foundations, while the house was
filled with smoke. Then I cried,*

*Woe is me! I am lost,
for I am a man of unclean lips
and I dwell among a people of unclean lips;
yet with these eyes I have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.*

*Then one of the seraphims flew to me carrying in his hand a glowing coal which he had
taken from the altar with a pair of tongs - He touched my mouth with it and said,*

*See, this has touched your lips;
Your iniquity is removed,
And your sin is wiped away.*

*Then I heard the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?
And I answered, Here am I; send me. He said, Go and tell this people:
You listen and listen, but you will not understand.
You may look and look again, but you will never know.*

Isaiah 6:1-9

WEDNESDAY: Sign of our Hope

It may sound paradoxical, but the fact that the cross of Jesus uncovers for us the mystery of iniquity is itself the demonstration that the basis of our hope is present in the cross. There was infinitely more happening on the rise of ground outside Jerusalem than the revelation of evil. The revelation of evil is only possible for us because of this 'more' that is happening. There is a deeper truth to the Cross than that of our redemption and it is this deeper truth which makes it our redemption.

Isaiah, in the quotation above, typifies our spontaneities, our pre-occupation with guilt in place of a concern for life itself. When the angel dismisses his self-preoccupation, he

is freed for life and immediately responds to the divine concern, "Send me." And then he is warned that it is going to be a hard job getting through to people who cannot see or hear what it is that makes for our peace and life. In fact, no message short of the lived truth, the Word made flesh, can get behind our elaborate defenses against life. Jesus, our Source of Life, lives the message which undermines our defenses, the message which culminates in Lk.23:34, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

It is true that Jesus was judicially murdered, killed by the leaders of the religious and civil establishments who were responding to the crowd. But it is also true that it was the way this man was living – insisted on living, in God's name – that provoked such murderous response. Jesus died because he was faithful to the life that God is bringing to the world. It is on that life we need to concentrate to discover hope in the cross of Jesus. He died because of the truth of God-for-us. He died because of fidelity to the kingdom of God, the future God is bringing to this world. And it was the way he died – loving us who are haters of life and of sheer humanity – that revealed once and for all the truth of God-for-us. This truth was the Good News for Jesus. It is on this truth above all that we must keep our eyes fixed throughout Holy Week.

A later oversimplification summarizes all this as obedience to the will of the Father and concludes that Jesus died because the Father wanted it. But the Father did not send Jesus into this world to die: the Father sent Jesus to be a loving human being, to live to the full. In the world as we have shaped it, this meant he would be crucified. What happened to him is what happens to love incarnate in our world. But there is no future in concentrating on what we did; the Good News centers exclusively on what the creative power of Love does. The worst part of the oversimplification is the way in which it obscures the heart of the Good News as Jesus lived it: God's passionate "No" to all human misery and pain.

I am suggesting that fruitful reflection on the passion and death of Jesus never dissociates it from the context of his life and of what was central to his life. All of life, its heart-wrenching pains as well as its excess of joy, was eucharist to the scandalous faith of this man. He poured himself out on all of life in ecstatic response to the God

who was coming to embrace human concern in infinite compassion. In the light of the Dawn that is coming to us from on high, no fear of anything in life or death controlled him. And those who were open even a little to the infectious faith of this man discovered that it was impossible to be sad in the presence of Jesus. This is the background to the tradition of festive meals wherever he went.

Under the spell of this Kingdom-intoxicated man, people came alive to the desire that they had long ago crucified within themselves - the desire to pour themselves out on life in love. It had been the first casualty of their attempt to secure themselves against human vulnerability. Now, with the Source of the universe itself as their security, it could re-emerge. At least as long as Jesus was around to inspire them.

But to receive your security from the sheer gift of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus meant letting go of any other source of security. It meant an end to dominative and exploitative uses of power, a radical end to injustice. The Good News is broken to the poor, only to the poor. People are saved insofar as they are assimilated to the poor. To receive the pure gift and to live the pure gratuity of the gift is to abandon all other attempts to secure ourselves at the expense of our fellow women and men. Concretely, this means distancing ourselves from the poor-generating structures of injustice and living out our lives in solidarity with the struggle of the poor for life.

I stress the above because of a fear expressed by John Taylor. He doubts if the Church is ready to throw itself into the struggle for justice grounded in love and, in consequence, anticipates that any comment on the demands of justice – even the statement that the historical struggles against injustice cannot anticipate simple victory this side of Kingdom Come – will be used in escapist fashion to justify present apathy. His sound conclusion is that, despite such danger, the truth of Christ is not negotiable. My own concern is not primarily with the delay of the kingdom, the length of the struggle for justice, but with the primacy of love in the struggle. My peculiar fear is that what is most distinctive about the manner of life of Jesus will be rejected as weakening the struggle of oppressed people.' If this were to happen, the liberating truth of the God of Jesus would no longer be consciously present to people in their struggles.

And what is unavoidably and scandalously the case in the praxis of Jesus is the overthrow of a presumption clearly operative even in the action of John the Baptist: first repentance, then communion. For Jesus, proffering communion to all is true proclamation of the Kingdom of God. This overthrow is clearest in the pervasive tradition of the eating habits of Jesus, the record of those with whom he habitually ate. He ate with sinners.

Israel had no problem with forgiveness of sin: well, no more than Christians seem to have. There was a welcome for the repentant sinner. There would have been no scandal if Jesus ate with people who were repentant. A repentant sinner is not a sinner. Jesus is said to have eaten with sinners.

What drove him to this was the truth of the God of the coming Kingdom. This God, according to the conviction of Jesus, had only one concern - people's happiness. God wished to give people joy, peace, life to the full, all this as a pure gift of superabundant generosity and love. People's past was an irrelevance in the face of this enormous generosity of God. Those who admitted their 'no claim' status in the face of this gift received it as children receive. As I stressed above, to receive the gift as a gift was the form of repentance and involved a new way of life.

This proclamation and praxis of the Kingdom was experienced as destructive and even blasphemous by others. It led to his death. But Jesus died as he had lived. He did not change. He refused to return evil for evil. He persisted in doing good and opposing evil and suffering to the end. His death is what clinches the unconditional character of his proclamation and life-style: the Kingdom of God is at hand and there is only one way to live now. He did not swerve from living out the truth of God for us in the face of hatred and violence: his death, suffered through and for others, asserts the unconditional validity of loving as God loves, the God whose sun shines on all alike, whose care for people cannot be affected by their response.

Because of this consistency, the death of Jesus is the climax of his witness to the God of

the coming Kingdom. All his living had been a claim to be acting as God acts; it was through the creative "finger of God" that he did what he did for suffering people. Fidelity to the Kingdom of God had brought him unavoidably to this place. Therefore, in his dying we have the fullest historical expression of who God is. It is, of course, we who brought Jesus to the cross but nothing we did could make him betray the truth of the Father for us. He died loving, not hating. He experienced, as his deepest suffering, the eclipse of God' (Buber), God-forsakenness, and accepted that too, for us.

In this he revealed God as the One who prefers to be eliminated from this world rather than do violence to those created for life. In the crucified Jesus, God is revealed as the One who takes the lowest place in creation from which God will never be displaced. God is revealed on Calvary as the One who identifies primarily with all the victims of creation and history, with all that is weak and vulnerable and God forsaken.

God does not use force, not even against the crucifiers of God's Jesus. God cannot. Because God is love, just as Jesus had lived it. We hear no condemnation on Calvary because Jesus is true to the Father: there is no condemnation in God.

The Kingdom comes all right – but in the power of suffering love. Love does not discriminate between guilty and innocent suffering. This shocks us. Yet it is the implication of there being no condemnation in God: for love all suffering is innocent and it only wants to abolish it. But it is this selfsame love that stands implacably against all the injustice and falsehood that bring suffering to people. Here, in the truth of God, we find the toots of Jesus' praxis of justice grounded in love.

Yesterday I touched on the extent to which the evil of the world is the result of what we have chosen to define as good. Because we assume the unproblematic nature of such definitions, we do not see how terrible it would be for all of us if strict justice was the law in accordance with which the universe was to be run. None of us would survive. Forgetful of our truth as receivers of gift, we easily identify ourselves with our idealization of justice which is not gentle, not kind. Jesus would never have come to death if he had been willing to compromise with injustice. The issue is not

postponement of the demands of justice. The issue is living justice from the base of unconditional love of life in all its forms. Here there can be no desire to punish, only to further life.

Our theme is hope. A hope which is grounded in the truth of God revealed on Calvary is a boundless hope. We have done the very worst and it has made no difference: we have murdered love in our world and failed to change the inexhaustible compassionate concern of God for us and all of creation. In this absence of condemnation, we are free to name our evil and live again. Life truly begins for those who discover themselves as murderers of life at the foot of the cross, knowing themselves still infinitely cherished.

But to come alive in that place is to respond to the Love that suffers our evil; it is to know ourselves invited to enter into God's pain with the world, from the world, and for the world. Liberated women and men suffer with God for the life of creation.

Already, on Monday, we spoke of the loss of a beloved child as a suffering for which there could be no explanation, no justification. What was said then about the truth of a material universe was not meant as an explanation – there are no answers. It was simply pointed out that suffering was rooted in the limitations of created reality, far beyond the relevance of any connection between sin and suffering. Any attempt to explain suffering so that it ceases to trouble us is dehumanizing escapism.

Theology should at least try not to fall below the level attained by the Book of Job.' What is called theodicy – justifying God in the face of human suffering – is not a viable project. There is no answer that could be acceptable and no way of getting rid of the issue, since the issue is nothing other than "the open wound of life in this world."

In the cross of Jesus we discover that God does not want people to suffer. God is on the side of all suffering creation. This is not an answer either. It is an invitation to love and suffer life as God does, an invitation to hope in the promise contained in the goodness of God's vulnerable creation even though we cannot simply make justice happen. It is an invitation to promote the good in love in spite of on-going evil which is to be borne.

It is an invitation to risk as God risks for the sake of all creation. The cross is the key to our salvation in convincing us to love in the midst of hate; it is the key to our hope because it reveals to us the ground of all hope – the truth and the justice of the Creator God.

*In truth, in very truth I tell you,
a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain
unless it falls into the ground and dies;
but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.
The man who loves himself is lost,
but he who hates himself in this world
will be kept safe for eternal life ...*

*During supper, Jesus, well aware that the Father had entrusted everything to him ...
rose from table, laid aside his garments, and, taking a towel, tied it round himself. Then
he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them
with the towel.*

John 12:24-25; 13:3-5

THURSDAY: Dying we Live

It may seem strange to speak of the cross as the ground of our hope before we have mentioned resurrection. But it was the presence of the God of Jesus in the cross that we had in focus above and it was that faithful presence that came to be recognized as operative in the resurrection. When we say that there was 'more' going on at Calvary than our redemption, this is a way of pointing to the truth of God and of God's creative purpose as it is lived out by Jesus. Resurrection faith is the Christian form of belief in creation.

There is eternal life *before* death. The Gospel stories show it in the living unto death of Jesus. The Spirit of God is what is manifest in Jesus' affirmation of life and it is the eternal life of God that is present as the surrender of love unto death. This is what has a future- "if we become incorporate with him in a death like his"... is what Paul stresses. This is the death that flows from the acceptance, the affirmation and the love of frail and mortal life.

And this is the message of the first of the two quotations from John's Gospel above: fruitfulness, fertility, being a life-giver, all are tied up with dying, letting go for the sake of life. This dying can only be done in hope. Hopelessness, on the other hand, goes with infertility. Wherever we try to preserve ourselves and withdraw from costly caring for heartbreakingly fragile and vulnerable life, we embark on a sort of living death, immune to pain, closed to God.

The ground of our hope is God identified in Jesus with God's cherished creation. Jesus did not preach and live 'God' but rather 'the kingdom of God', i.e., the future God is bringing to a loved world. The manner of witnessing to this 'nearness' of God-for-us was a life lived wholly and without reserve at the service of vulnerable life. As this offer of the coming kingdom met with rejection, Jesus was faced with certain death. We do not know how he managed to integrate his approaching death into his proclamation: he may have had to do it in the darkness of faith. But he did it. And consistent to the end he celebrated with his friends a last festive meal that had the shape of a farewell in hope. We certainly cannot understand the significance of this meal independently of all the other meals that Jesus had shared with people, independently of the way of life which had brought him to this meal marked by death. But this does not prevent the meaning of his message from being embodied as clearly here as anywhere else in the story.

We are given two traditions regarding this meal, that of the Synoptic Gospels and that of St. John's Gospel. John concentrates on Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet. (For the first time this week, our reflections have come to coincide with the liturgical action of the day, Holy Thursday). I would like to enter into the meaning of this action by reflecting on a Gospel story to which it is closely related. It is the story of a woman whose action caused Jesus to predict that it would never be forgotten wherever the Gospel was being proclaimed. The force of his saying that seems to be that the woman's action revealed a grasp of what the Gospel is all about: this woman got things right.

Mary of Bethany anticipates the footwashing scene by her anointing of Jesus. In doing this she embodies the kind of discipleship Jesus elaborates in John 13-17. There is a mistaken assumption that the sense of Jesus' resurrection is so strong in John's Gospel

that it seems to deny or at least belittle the reality of death. Nothing could be further from the truth. None of the synoptic Gospels stresses in such detail the deadliness of death. The stench of decomposition hovers over the story of Lazarus. The threat of death follows Jesus on every step of his earthly journey. We are never allowed to forget it for one moment. It is explicit in the context of the Bethany narrative' and in Jesus' grim reminder that "you will not always have me". In the face of looming death Jesus alone seems able to name what is happening. Jesus and this woman.

Instead of the paralysis and inability to comprehend that has gripped the companions of Jesus, this woman does not go into denial. She grasps intuitively the certainty of the approaching death and she responds. She asks no questions. In the face of death, one must love life. One must love the threatened life and show in every way possible how precious that life is. In any other context her action might seem extravagant. But in the face of certain death it is singularly appropriate and it is acclaimed as such by Jesus- "When she poured this oil on my body it was her way of preparing me for burial." Her reckless pouring of a pint of expensive ointment on Jesus feet (Matthew says on his head) enacts for Jesus the truth that love is stronger than death. In this creative response to the deadliness of death Mary of Bethany embodies the faith that is at the heart of the Gospel. It believes in life as the gift of God and refuses to betray that life even under the threat of death. To trust God and to serve life in its integrity are interchangeable expressions for the one gift of faith that) Jesus sought to bring to birth in us.

If we are right to see Mary's action as anticipating the footwashing scene, it follows that we should see in her the kind of discipleship later developed in the discourse of chapters 14-17. It is a discipleship of service. In his own action of washing their feet, Jesus gives the disciples an example of what it means to follow him. It means to be a servant of life, to pour out our lives for the sake of life. The endless questions and apparent incomprehension of the disciples at the meal reveal as much as conceal their real pre-occupation, their grief at their impending loss, their implicit cry "Why does it have to be like this?" The discourse is meant to comfort them. There is no farewell discourse at the meal in Bethany. Mary did not need any.

She shows in her action a knowledge that death is only overcome by confronting its hard reality face to face. She tells us that death is ugly and strong, that love is stronger, that the love of God can be trusted in the death of Jesus.

Our feet are surely the humblest part of our bodies. The washing of feet may seem very inadequate as a symbol to carry the whole message of Christian living. But if we open ourselves to participation in this ritual, especially if we make it reciprocal, we may find otherwise. Death and resurrection cannot be the truth of one moment only. Precisely as Gospel truth it must be manifest somehow in every moment, the principle of all living. The shape of all authentic living is death/resurrection willingly undergone. In John's Gospel the washing of the feet is an instance of the kind of everyday dying that real living demands. This is how it can point, for John, towards the Eucharist.

In our growth to adulthood we exert great effort towards being able to do certain basic things by ourselves. Our sense of independence and privacy depends on being able to take care of bodily hygiene without dependency on others. We expect others to be able to take care of themselves also in these matters. So, to kneel and wash another's feet involves us in some humiliation, in something even ridiculous. Perhaps even more, to allow another to wash my feet entails a loss of hard-won independence, a loss of privacy and thus of dignity for me. Either way this ritual brings us to a tiny laying down of life.

And Peter resisted this. He was then told that this was the only way to continue in communication with Jesus. Either we accept to die into and for one another or we never truly live the gift of life. This is the connection with sin in the incident. To wash and allow ourselves to be washed signifies the opposite of sin's refusal of death, sin's insistence that others, always others, should have to be victimized, to die, so that I may be preserved. What might it mean to live humanly?

The enormously real sin dimension of our history obscures the positive message of the Gospel. It is not easy to distinguish in the one historical event of the passion what it is that flows from the mystery of iniquity and what from the love of the Father responded

to by Jesus. It is not easy but it is necessary. Many of the Fathers of the Church had a straightforward answer to the question as to whether the Son of God came to act or to die. They said Jesus was born in order to be able to die. Free and loving response to the God of life means allowing the seeds of eternity to be sown in the soil of the world and having the kingdom of God burst forth in this soil. We must die so that there may be more life.

What justifies this voluntary laying down of life, then, is our desire to witness to our unity in the one flesh, to witness to the truth of our belonging to each other and to our earth. But it is this truth which is denied by our elaborate social structures of privilege and discrimination. It will not do to forget sin. I believe that it can be misleading to say that Holy Thursday, the Eucharist, is about unity: it is primarily about disunity, sin. As everybody except bourgeois liberals can see, there is no real unity in the human world. This means that the only authentic unity in the world must necessarily take the form of the struggle against that in the world which makes unity impossible. We can only express unity sacramentally and the sacramental signs of Holy Thursday take us into the real depths of both sin and love, the meal (love-feast) marked by death on the torture machine.

For faith, unity is a mystery; we can only talk about it with reference to God and what God is trying to effect in human history. As McCabe puts it, the ultimate unity of people is only to be found in God and the real God is only to be found in unity between people. And this unity does not exist in our world. Our only approach to it is the solidarity of the poor and exploited against their oppressors. This is both true and not enough.

To know God through the prism of our sinfulness is still not to know God. The option for the poor is necessary because of sin. Hence the Kingdom can only be expressed sacramentally, in hints and gestures towards the future, in gestures that convey the costly direction towards the future but cannot simply depict that future. Paul's Corinthian communities forgot the complexity. They apparently wanted to celebrate the Eucharist in a way that was not marked by death, thereby losing one half of the symbolism. Whatever they may think, Paul tells them, in coming together it is not the

Lord's supper that they eat. Paul knows this because of the exclusion of the poor.

In the Eucharist we celebrate in symbol what we ought to be but clearly are not. But if we enter the celebration as a chance of conversion, forgiveness of sin, then we do come in touch with that for which we hope.

The eucharist is the great sacrifice of praise by which the Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation. For the world which God has reconciled is present at every eucharist: in the bread and wine, in the persons of the faithful, and in the prayers they offer for themselves and for all the people... The eucharist thus signifies what the world is to become: an offering and hymn of praise to the Creator, a universal communion in the body of Christ, a kingdom of justice, love and peace in the Holy Spirit.

As Mackey puts it, eucharistic praxis is the Christian alternative to war.

We for our part
have crossed over from death to life;
this we know because
we love our brothers and sisters.

I Jn. 3:13

FRIDAY: Kissing Evil On the Lips

The Christian focus on the Cross has nothing to do with tragic consciousness. It is not a sick pre-occupation with negativity in the place of an allegedly healthy involvement with life. It is the fruit of the deepest concern for life.

The *memoria passionis* will always be that which generates creative action for life. Some futurologists, focusing on possible nuclear or actual ecological disaster, have taken to using the word 'holocaust' to designate our feared future. In doing this they seek to motivate people to action. It is a dangerous move. We find it much easier to talk of our future victimhood than to focus on the past where we were the actors in perpetrating catastrophe. But such talk will never release the creativity needed to avert the feared future. The challenge will only be met by people who are keeping alive the memory and awareness of past and present suffering and whose lives and thinking revolve now about practical concern for victims, a concern that ensures that the evil will not keep happening.

True contemplation of the Cross involves us creatively in a story of suffering that is not over yet. But in the Cross we experience first and foremost acceptance, and it is this that opens up for us the possibility of confronting our own evil in depth. We are enabled to see that *life* is represented by the man on the cross, *death* by those who put him there. As Sebastian Moore put it some time back, the voice from the cross is saying to us "Can't you see, what you are crucifying in me is the human being you are terrified to

become?"

Jesus' acceptance of death is the consummation of the compassionate love for life-denying people characteristic of all his living. It is the ultimate step in the eucharistic way of life reflected on above. No matter how we may have twisted things, this is the world and we are the people that have emerged from the loving creative Providence of God. To say "yes" to life, to receive it as gift, is to accept everything as an interconnected unity. If that 'everything' includes murderous rejection, then that too is to be embraced by love.

Because there is so little love of life in us, we are alienated from death and cannot help seeing disaster as incompatible with a loving Creator. Only when we become capable of offered suffering will the world not be too wicked for God to be good. And that moment happens for us when the compassionate death of Jesus is seen as the human dimension of a mystery whose God- dimension is a self-identifying of God with the suffering of all creatures. In the death of Jesus we discover that frail and mortal human life is what is most precious to God.

The Spirit is understood in the Old Testament as the divine energy of life. The Spirit is understood in the New Testament as the power of the resurrection. The deep continuity between the two ties in this: the life in question is, now understood as correspondence to the experience of the Spirit as unconditional Love. It is a life lived wholly and without reserve. Love unto death is what alone can show such unconditional love in history. The life of God is revealed in Jesus' death as the surrender of love unto death- it must flower into resurrection.

It is not because of our hope in the resurrection that we are enabled to live wholly and without reserve. It is because we find ourselves enabled to live wholly - to accept, affirm and love fragile and mortal life - that we have resurrection hope for the world. This is the import of the message from the First Epistle of John with which we began this chapter. And we are enabled to live in this way by finding God in the love with which Jesus died.

I do not mean to suggest that anything of this could have been understood apart from the divine action of raising the crucified Jesus. The Gospel narrative evokes powerfully the hopelessness of the disciples after Calvary. As long as he was among them, his wholeness (sinlessness), his aliveness, irresistibly evoked their own deepest humanity. We are born creatures of unending desire, teaching out to all of life. But a diminished sense of self-worth cripples our desire, puts it 'on hold', and this is the shape of sin in us. Present to him, people came in touch with the fullness of their desire again. Once again, giving them- selves fully to life and rejoicing in it became the truth of people. That is why it was so devastating when he was eliminated wiped out by the imperial power as easily as you might swat a fly. They must have felt that they had been tricked into believing in life and love and God.

Normally, we do not experience death, we experience loss. Other people die; we carry on. But the involvement of the disciples with Jesus was so deep and intense that it makes sense to posit for them at this point an experience of death, an experience of radical hopelessness. And it was from that place that they were enabled to come back. And the shape of their living after they came back was of people who had their death behind them. I mean, people whose living was no longer controlled by fear of death or of anything. But nothing short of resurrection could effect this and lead them to affirm that Jesus was right about God.

But the truth they then discovered in the death of Jesus had been there all the time.

Those who have read as far as this and accept something of the truth with which we are struggling are hardly in danger of misreading the Gospel story at this point. But the tradition is far from unambiguous and I feel the need to touch on a few possible distortions.

The letting-go lived out by Jesus shows no trace of distancing from what is transitory or from people. Later Christian tradition has not gone unaffected by forms of 'abandonment' which derive from the Stoics. The focus moves to 'the vanity of the

world' and of all passing things. An insufficiently profound modern-day Western encounter with Eastern wisdom seems heir to a similar refusal to accept the ambiguity, the transitory. Such interpretation of abandonment was characterized by Hans Urs von Balthasar as the most pernicious enemy of Christianity and of humanity in general because it paralyzes every genuine involvement in earthly transitory life. Rosemary Haughton draws our attention to an opposite dynamic in the passion of Jesus: he is portrayed as giving the most detailed attention to the needs and reactions of others. His concern to the end is for what is happening to them.

This topic of abandonment has another meaning that leads into the heart of the message of Good Friday. It begins with Jesus' agony in Gethsemane and culminates with the terrible cry recorded by Mark at his death. We seem to have an emotional block when it comes to looking at this deepest level of the suffering of Jesus, his experience of God-forsakenness. In retrospect, I think it may come from our unresolved God-image. We keep alive a God other than the One being revealed on Calvary, a God who could 'intervene' in response to the prayer of his Jesus, and we find it too disturbing to think that God could intervene and did not. And so we deny the radicality of the God-forsakenness of Jesus.

But this stratagem blocks our access to the life-giving truth of Calvary. The truth is that the eclipse of God is real in a loveless world but that this fails to remove God. The traditional wisdom was that God was far from the sinners, from the accursed, from those who go down into the grave. And so there were situations that could lead people to despair or justify them in distancing themselves from others adjudged to be God forsaken. Jesus, ever faithful to the love of the Father, is "made to be sin" for us, according to Paul. He experiences inwardly and without distancing himself from it the world from which Love has been abolished. He dies in inconceivably total darkness.

This is the most hideous moment in our history and also the most beautiful. "My God, why have you forsaken me?" In this God-forsakenness every trace of meaning is obscured. As a result of his dying like that, we now know that there is no human situation from which God is absent, no guilt that can modify God's loving nearness and

concern for us, nothing that can ever justify despair. This is the place where the discovery is grounded that in God there is no condemnation, that, for God, all people's suffering is abhorrent.

Again, a word traditionally used in relation to the death of Jesus is 'sacrifice'. It can be a dangerous word in the mouths of people who fail to love themselves and life to the extent that Jesus did. Just as we discussed earlier about the eucharistic way of Jesus as the manner in which all of life was gift to his radical faith and therefore to be received with thanks, so we must grasp that his saying 'yes' to all of life is what leads to his sacrificial way. To truly love people who are afraid of love is a very costing business. To accept to find ourselves through going out to others in love and taking them seriously in their otherness is to make their story and their pain part of our own becoming. This is the meaning of the sacrificial way of Jesus.

This path of Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God, grounds the ethic of love of enemies, of overcoming evil with good. It is difficult to find a language appropriate to this way of living, but it matters that we do. Due to an insidious militarization of our everyday vocabulary, we can be tricked into 'selling ourselves short'. Worse, since language forms consciousness, we may lose our original insight through mat-description. I am thinking of the manner in which we speak of tactics or even strategies of non-violence. This disguises the intrinsic meaning of a loving response by making it sound purely functional - how best to get things done. Non-violence may be the best way to get things done but that is not why it is embraced: it is embraced because the enemy is loved.

To clarify the point, in that part of the world from which I come there is a very ancient tradition of how to cope with unjust oppressors. One simply goes and starves oneself on the oppressor's doorstep. If redress is not forthcoming, the oppressor is left with the public guilt of one's death. Jesus does not die like that.

Moved by the Spirit, our Church has in recent times publicly committed itself to the quest for peace and justice and come to recognize that without this quest there is no

authentic evangelization. But if this is not to remain empty rhetoric, Christian communities must live from a burning human center where sin is swallowed up in the love of life, a love that includes our enemies. Through this alone can there be redemption of the times. Merely functional non-violence is not enough. Such a non-violent person places the onus for his/her death on the inflictor. We are challenged to the further step of appropriating our death in love for the inflictor and all people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945, has left us a credal formula which gives some sense of what is involved in corresponding to the God of Jesus:

I believe
that God both wills and is able to
bring good out of everything, even the worst.
For this He needs people who are prepared
to allow everything to be served for the best.

I believe
that in every crisis
God wants to provide us
with as much power of resistance as we need.
But God never gives it in advance
so that we will entrust ourselves
solely to him and not rely on ourselves.

I believe
that even our mistakes and wrongdoing
are not fruitless
and that it is no more difficult for God
to cope with them than with our presumed good deeds.

I believe
that God is no 'timeless fate' but, rather, that he waits upon

and responds to
our sincere prayer and responsible deeds.

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies.

Shakespeare's King Lear

SATURDAY: Let God Easter in Us

Those people who embrace the Jesus Principle, the secret of living as life through-death, know no more than anybody else the shape of the future. They cannot visualize, either for themselves or for others, the resurrection they believe will surely follow. It is no part of authentic faith to be able to picture the future. In fact, the opposite is the case. Authentic faith has as its content the knowledge that God can be trusted with the future and it is willing to let the Mystery remain mystery. But we cannot live without symbols and people of faith have always dreamt of the future that God is bringing to our world. If they happen to be poets their dreaming can supply us with the images that can nourish us and give us orientation in life.

Jesus inherited such guiding symbols and through his life and death gave them a new content. The 'kingdom of God' is the metaphor of definitive salvation seen as a society of brothers and sisters, freed from all oppression, where every tear is wiped away. Within this perfect community, the 'resurrection of the body' is the symbol for the complete salvation and happiness of the individual in his or her distinctive corporeality, the source of other's enjoyment of us. And, finally, the symbol of 'the new heaven and

the new earth' expresses the transformation of an undamaged ecology, the enduring condition for experiencing truly human salvation.

And there are poets in our own time who can suggest images to nourish hope.

One day people will touch and talk perhaps
easily,
And loving be natural as breathing and warm as
sunlight,
And people will untie themselves,
as string is unknotted,
Unfold and yawn and stretch and spread
their fingers,
Unfurl, uncurl like seaweed returned to the sea,
And work will be simple and swift
as a seagull flying,
And play will be casual and quiet
as a seagull settling,
And the clocks will stop, and no one will wonder
or care or notice,
And people will smile without reason,
even in winter, even in the rain.

A.S.J. Tessimond, 'Day Dream'

But resurrection faith is not a matter of dreaming. It is waking from our dream of reality to the reality in the dream. It is a way of living which proclaims the truth of the Risen One to the world. And the shape of this way of living is simply a continuation of the way Jesus responded to ordinary people in his sense of the God of the Kingdom. Resurrection faith is shown in our engagement for the people God loves wherever their dignity and life is being threatened. The resurrection of Jesus cannot be separated from his career and death. In the New Testament, the new thing that the Father does for Jesus

is understood, first and foremost, as recognition of the intrinsic and irrevocable significance of his lived proclamation of the Kingdom. He was right about God. It follows that the primary witness today to the truth of his resurrection ties in the quality of commitment and hope displayed in the lives of Christians.

Where Christians follow in prayer and liberation in the footsteps of Jesus, there is no crisis of resurrection faith. But in the absence of such following I would wish to identify with the strong sentiments of Edward Schillebeeckx:

On the other hand, I must say with all my heart: it is better not to think that God is true, better not to believe in eternal life, than to believe in a God who belittles, keeps down and humiliates men and women with an eye to a better hereafter.

To let God easter in us is, as Lear says to Cordelia, to take upon ourselves the mystery of things. It is to see everything, especially people, as carriers of the mystery, the Mystery present at the heart of our Universe and all its manifestations. It is to be in touch with the depth, the promise, which all life carries, the deep-down truth of things. If we respect and cherish creation we sense the promise it carries and no matter what such respect costs us we know it is worthwhile. We become willing to die a little so that there may be more life. In this way we enter into the path of Jesus, the path of life through death.

The text with which this chapter begins comes from the closing scene of King Lear. The old man, crazed by suffering brought on him by his own failure to recognize real loving, is overcome by delight at the discovery that the love of Cordelia had never been withdrawn. In the joy of forgiveness, he projects with supreme sanity the shape of their future living. It is a picture of the world as perceived and lived in the light of the resurrection. Through the sacramentality of Cordelia's love, he is in touch with the mercy that embraces all things; he has become aware of how much people need each other and must tender and receive forgiveness constantly. He reveals enormous compassion for everyone, even as he sees through the folly of which he himself had

been guilty – guilting the butterfly. Human beings are created fragile and vulnerable and, as such, are beautiful. But we cannot believe in the beauty of being vulnerably human. We try to protect ourselves through disguise – possessions, achievements, status. We hide the very thing that makes us desirable. Lear's compassion flows from a sense of the mystery of things, the forgiveness that is the air we breathe, God loving people.

To let God easter in us involves a break with our fixed roots in the socially-induced unquestioning sense of 'the way things are'. We need to go beyond ourselves in a way that is not flight or evasion but rather a discovery of the possibilities of transformation of the everyday world. The whole process is suggested in the opening of Wallace Stevens' 'The Man with the Blue Guitar':

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

If, like Jesus, we learn to receive all as gift and do not cling to anything, we may come to 'let go' and thus be liberated into the fertility of newly-germinating life.

Fertility was a great theme in the Easter Vigil liturgy. This liturgy needs to be

considered as a self-contained liturgy which developed quite independently of the Holy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies. The latter grew out of pilgrimages to the Holy Places associated with Jesus. The Easter Vigil was the great liturgy of the early Church. It took its form from the Jewish Passover meal and grew out of the elaborate celebration of Easter morning as the heart and life of all Creation. It nearly died out over the centuries but in 1956 a courageous attempt was made to recover it in its full splendor.

Liturgical patterns need generations to take root. Neither here in the Philippines nor anywhere else in the Catholic world has the Vigil succeeded in winning pride of place in the liturgical year. But it may come. It may be that the well-intentioned revision of the ritual in 1970 is partly to blame for the slowness with which this celebration is regaining hold. The revision cut back on the excessive number of readings – there were twelve – but it also cut back on the crucial symbolism of life and fertility, death and new life, which had been faithfully recovered in 1956.

It makes sense to talk of an emasculation of the symbolism because the 1956 liturgy was strongly sexual. Only thus could it celebrate the transforming power of creation in us. All the symbols come from the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis. The font symbolizes the womb of mother Church fertilized by the phallic form of the lighted candle which is plunged ever deeper with rising tones by the celebrant. When the candle had reached its deepest point, the celebrant was instructed to breathe on the water in the form of the Greek letter psi, first letter of the term for life, psyche. The symbolism is of fecundity and regeneration. The fertilization of the virgin Church is related to the fertilization of the primeval waters, the waters of chaos. We are given a creation story centered on Christ. The birth of new members, the catechumens, is linked to the birth of the universe. This powerful and primitive ritual takes place in the darkness of the night.

By contrast, the 1970 ritual says that the priest “may” lower the candle into the water and his action is accompanied by a theologically impeccable prayer that all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism may rise again in newness of life. The richness that the old symbolism was trying to communicate is gone. We cannot afford to lose it.

Sexuality is the form of being human, it is the mark of our vulnerability, the manner in which we are at each other's mercy in terms of our becoming and growth. There is a connection between sexuality and death. The message of both is one and the same: we do not have our lives of ourselves, we are not our own. We belong to something greater than ourselves and our happiness ties in our letting go into that. Our habitual trivialization of sexuality is the sign of our inability to accept its true meaning. We creatively live sexuality by accepting the truth of our mutual belonging and by accepting it radically, my flesh for the life of the world.

The old Easter Vigil, then, was not being crude in its choice of symbols: it was being precise. Sexuality and death are much too closely intertwined for people to be able to make sense of one without the other and the Easter message reveals the truth of fecundity as life through death. The life of the Spirit in people does not shun death or try to preserve itself; it embraces its death for the sake of life. Hope, fertility and suffering go together. The more intensely and unreservedly we love life, the more intensely we experience the pain of creation and the deadliness of death. Not to love and not to hope is to shrink from this pain. But in hopeless striving to make ourselves immune to the pain we become enclosed in an infertile, living death. Jesus, dying on the cross, embodied life: we, putting him there, are embodying death.

Not just the Vigil but every eucharist and every sacrament is a celebration of the world as a resurrection world. Sacraments exist to give us a toe-hold on reality. Jesus was rejected by the crucifying world: we meet him now by standing against the crucifying world and with its victims. The life that comes out of death remains nevertheless life out of death, forever marked by its path: he is living but "as though slain" (Rev. 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). That is why the Cross, contemplated in the power of the Spirit, remains our best picture of the resurrection, it remains the dominant Christian symbol. It is there that death is swallowed up in love. And it remains forever true that we experience resurrection in trying to love as He loved.