

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 15th 2015

Jesus knows how to use touching and deeply meaningful images –When a woman is in labor..., truly a beautiful image that manifests the possibility of a pain-and-joy experience. Ordinarily the experience of pain and joy do not come together for us, though they may belong in the same context. The pain and joy of giving birth belong in the context of new life, just as the anguish of surgery and the joy of recovery belong in the context of health.

But we do not seem to be able to experience pain and joy simultaneously. Liturgically we ritualize this non-simultaneity during Holy Week. We know that the passion-death-resurrection of Jesus is one single Christ-event, yet we take three consecutive days to ritualize it liturgically. Surely, we could put it all together into one single liturgical celebration –after all we telescope the years of Jesus’ life on earth into one single liturgical year. But we cannot make room in ourselves for ritualizing struggle and joy at the same time.

Strangely enough, sometimes it is precisely the experience of pain that renders us capable of experiencing joy, as, looking back on a painful experience, we can be glad and rejoice that we are no longer suffering. The late poet Jessica Powers, known in her Carmelite life as Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit, experienced a lot of physical pain in the last years of her life. On one occasion she told her fellow Carmelite Sisters: I do not enjoy suffering –who would?–, but I enjoy having suffered. Her prayerful retrospective reflection on her pain allowed her to rejoice in having suffered, but it was not a simultaneous experience. As we know well, not all pain leads to joy, but we can discover hints of joy in an experience of pain.

I see this in the Church’s current experience of pain caused by recent scandals and I read it as the pain of labor that is slowly yielding a new life: a life of a leadership that is becoming more accountable to the people of God and to society at large; a life of a leadership that, while it may not have been ill-intentioned in the past, is becoming less naive about compassion toward, and protection of, the abuser. But at present we are still feeling mostly the pangs of labor, not quite the joy of a new life.

As we gradually bring this Easter season to closure, let us pray for a faith vision to remember the Lord’s new risen life after his passion-death and for the trust to anticipate and discover signs of life-joy in our own pains.

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