

Good Friday  
(Is 52:13-53:12 / Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 / John 18:1-19:42)  
03.04.2015

*At the foot of the cross of Jesus stood Mary, His mother, and the disciple whom Jesus loved.*

I invite you to reflect with me on this gospel scene which is found only in John's passion narrative.

I suggest that we pay particular attention to what we witness in this scene has to teach us about the way to relate to those whom we love and perhaps especially in those moments of pain and suffering which we inevitably encounter in all true love relationships.

In the company of Mary and John who stood beside the suffering Christ, we can learn how to situate ourselves when the cross visits us as a present reality in our lives.

What strikes us as we read John's account of Jesus' passion and death is how in this context of deep sadness and heartfelt pain in which they find themselves plunged, Jesus, Mary and John all display such great sobriety.

There is no wailing or weeping.

There are no exaggerated exhibitions of sorrow and distress.

While there is sadness, it is restrained, measured, contained.

There is what I call *a chastity of expression*.

Words are spoken, but there is not one word too many.

Jesus, Mary and John manifest profound mutual respect.

There is a real attention to each other.

Each one's kind consideration for the other is evident.

Jesus' imminent death entailed a heart-rending leave-taking and yet what calm Mary and John exhibited.

The quality of love uniting Jesus, Mary and John is proved by the way they are able to let go off each other when this is required of them - and yet, at the same time, they are clearly totally there for each other as the parting takes place.

Let us look at each one's way of *being* in the story.

Mary stands there as if handing over the man Jesus she once bore as a child in her womb as part of her very self.

Because the one dying is the fruit of her womb, Mary not only lets go off Jesus, but part of herself has to be let go in the process.

(Any mother who has suffered the loss of a child will understand this.)

On Calvary's Hill Mary dies to herself in her love for her Son as she lets Him go.

The process of letting go off Jesus, giving Him up, handing Him over, rather than retaining Him for herself, had begun in Mary a long time before this moment.

Already, at His birth, she had to let go off Jesus she gave Him to the world.

From the outset Mary knew and accepted that her child was not hers alone.

While *Mary treasured all things concerning Jesus in her heart*, she did not hold on to Him with a captive jealousy. She never gave into the temptation of clinging to Jesus in a way that held Him a prisoner of her desires.

She left Jesus free to be who and what He was called to be for all people: their Saviour, their great liberator.

Mary herself evidently enjoyed a great inner freedom to have been able to allow Her Son to fulfil His mission in the way she did.

We could say that letting go of Jesus was always part of Mary's relationship with her Son. This meant that what was played out before her eyes on the cross, however painful to watch, was, in a way, natural to her. It was in line with the generous giving love that always characterises true love.

Mary is shown to have been prepared for and ready to consent to this final leave-taking.

As we look back over Mary's life of relationship with Jesus in John's gospel account, we recall that there is only one other scene in which she figures. It is found in chapter 2 of John's gospel. It is the story of the wedding feast at Cana.

In the story of Cana, Jesus refers already to the moment we are called to contemplate this afternoon. At Cana, Jesus says: *My hour has not yet come.* Now His hour has come. In the optic of John's gospel, it is at Calvary that these words spoken by Jesus find fulfilment: *Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*

Although Mary says nothing on Calvary's Hill, it is as if the words she spoke to the servants at Cana are echoed once again. This time it is to Jesus that they are addressed. They are not spoken, but in the exchange of regard Jesus and Mary are graced to share, she surely said to her Son: *Do whatever He tells you ... My Son, now You do whatever the Father tells You to do.*

Mary leaves Jesus free to do God's will, how painful it is for her to accept the consequences of God's call upon Him as He undergoes crucifixion. To be there at the foot of the cross was undoubtedly as crucifying an experience for Mary, at heart level, as it was for Jesus in the flesh. It demanded of her what love demands of all of us one day: that we dare to give our all for the one we love, accepting whatever pain this involves for us.

Love is what we contemplate on Calvary's Hill in this leave-taking scene: a love that is quasi-tangible, a love that draws us into itself.

What we are taught here is how love always liberates. Yes, love always sets free both the lover and the loved one. What is involved here is not some cheap, facile, freedom, but a costly freedom. Calvary is all about costly grace for all who lived it as Christ died, just as it is for those who live this experience today.

What we are given to contemplate today is how un-clinging mature love is.

However painful it is to let the loved one go, the mature lover can do so, because he or she has understood that their loved one is a pure gift in their life, a gift freely received, confided to one, not given to be possessed. We can never claim property rights over a loved one.

How often we spoil relationships by grasping and claiming for ourselves what does not belong to us!

For the health and well-being of all our relationships, we must come to realise that every person - our self included - is meant to be free.

For the health and well-being of our relationships we must remember that ultimately each one belongs to God alone.

We never own each other.

We can never lay claim upon another

What we are called to be, what we can be, are gifts to and for each other.

This realisation obliges us to move beyond all unhealthy clinging to the other and all the unhealthy self-clinging that can allow to destroy our lives, stunt our growth and hinder our freedom.

Those who truly love each other have to recognise and be able to say to themselves and their loved one in sincerity of heart: *I belong to God and you belong to God. We have been confided to each other, but ultimately we do not have any property rights over each other.*

While that might sound beautiful (and it is), there are times when it is very demanding of us and, even more than demanding, it is nothing less than a crucifying experience.

We have to accept to die to ourselves as we pronounce those words.

It hurts to have to recognise that we cannot hold on to our loved one or they to us in a way that controls each other's lives and thereby restricts each other's freedom.

(I think of one couple who at this very hour are going through the pain of letting go in the painful process of physical death. I think of another couple whose love for each other is great, but who cannot be together today.)

In every relationship there always comes a time when we simply have to let go.

That comes with physical death, of course, but also through the successive letting goes asked of us as we journey along life's way.

This was the case with Mary in regard to Jesus.

(This is true in parent children relationships and in other significant relationships in our lives - in couples, communities etc.)

To have to let go is not about discarding the other, or, to find oneself let go off, is not at all about being discarded.

Where there is true love there is never rejection.

Where there is true love there is never forgetfulness.

For, as St Paul reminds us, *love endures forever.*

All this to say: what?

Well, really that when we look at Jesus and Mary on Calvary's Hill in that supreme moment of Christ's passion and death what we are given to see is what freedom in love looks like.

We are given to see that it is totally respectful of the other, totally respectful of the other's vocation, God's call upon their life and, at the same time, considerate and concerned for the other's well-being.

If Mary let Jesus go as she did out of respect for His calling, note, at the same time, Jesus' loving

concern for Mary's welfare after His departure.

Jesus turns to the Beloved Disciple and asks him to regard Mary as his mother and to care for her. We read how *from that moment onwards, the beloved disciple made a place for Mary in his home.*

To be left free by one who loves us does not detract from our responsibility in their regard; it does not permit us to forget their well-being or to be inconsiderate of their on-going needs.

I would like to introduce John a little more into our reflection at this point.

This is only right, since Jesus Himself gives John all his place at the foot of the cross.

While I have concentrated much on the relationship between Jesus and Mary in this meditation, John's place is not something secondary. It is actually very important, fundamental even.

You see, it authenticates the veracity of the love shared between Jesus and Mary.

John's presence in this gospel scene shows us that Jesus and Mary were not so wrapped up in each other that there was no room for another in their midst.

John's presence - and the place he is given by Jesus - shows us that the love shared between mother and son was not an unhealthily exclusive love.

To the contrary!

It sought to be inclusive.

I find it striking that everywhere we meet Jesus and Mary together in the gospels others are there and are part of the story.

The love Jesus and Mary shared led to, we could say begat, communion.

Now a word just about John, who, of all Jesus' male disciples, is the only one to have dared to stand at the foot of the cross as Jesus died.

The eleven had fled out of fear.

They were frightened to be associated with Jesus, afraid of the consequences for themselves.

They abandoned Jesus to His fate anxious to save their own lives.

John, who is shown elsewhere in the gospels to have been a tame and *ready to shy away from suffering* figure, in the final hour dares to stand his ground.

He keeps vigil beside the suffering servant.

In every sense *he stands by* Jesus.

John did not fear taking the risk he took when he accepted to be associated with Jesus.

We might ask: where did John's strength come from?

John's strength came from his *perfect love* for Jesus.

What are we to understand by *perfect love*?

That word *perfect* can lead to all kinds of erroneous thought processes.

Perfection in love is made manifest by Christ Himself as He hangs on the cross.  
It is made manifest in humble vulnerability.  
Perfect love in the image of the love of Jesus, which John demonstrates, is, to use a theological term, *kenotic* love.  
It is the love of one who is not all full of him or herself!  
*Kenotic* love is self-emptied love. It is totally and unselfishly giving.

In a good and healthy sense *kenotic* love is self-forgetful love.

When one thinks of John another gospel scene comes to mind.  
It is that scene at the Last Supper where we see the Beloved Disciple simply and unashamedly lean his head upon Christ's breast.  
There John listened to and heard Christ's heartbeat.

I suggest that it was the tenderness John experienced at that moment that awoke within him the sense of inner security that permitted him to stand by the cross when the others fled.

Just think of it.

Do we not know from experience that love gives us a strong sense of feeling safe?  
Does the experience of a warm and caring affective presence not help banish our fears?  
When we have known another's love for us we can dare to become humbly vulnerable before them and alongside them.  
We feel strong and safe enough to do so.

Finally at the foot of the cross Mary and John were confided to each other by Christ.

In the Christian community we are all confided to each other.  
We are called to be concerned for one another, to care for each other, in the one family of faith which is born of our shared love for Christ.

May our reflection in this celebration of the Lord's Passion help all of us to grow into a more mature and respectful love of each other!  
May it help us situate ourselves more correctly in the privileged love relationships of our lives - in marriage, in community, in friendship - wherever we are called to relate to others at a deep heart level!

Amen!