

Monastic Scribe LXIV: March 8, 2024

WHAT...ME SUFFER?

The problem of suffering has no one easy explanation. Along with the problem of evil, humans have been trying to make sense of suffering for thousands of years. The issue of suffering has emerged lately in the death of Alexei Navalny. Why did he freely return to Russia knowing he would probably be arrested, imprisoned and even put to death? And, indeed, it is believed he was murdered in his arctic cell.

What is less well known, and not usually mentioned in the secular press, is that Navalny had previously been an atheist, converted to Christianity and was explicit in how his faith in Jesus Christ influenced his activism. With great calm, and even humor, he believed his stance on justice for Russia would be best served by being an active thorn in the side of Putin. Shortly before his death he quipped that spending Holy Week in solitary confinement was a proper way to be with Christ. Thus he chose a very Christian understanding of suffering as being redemptive and as being in solidarity with all those suffering. Just as Christ chose to do.

Another recent story is about Greg, a 37 year old teacher. Pains in his chest and shoulder brought him to the emergency room where he was diagnosed with cancer of the bile ducts. His 12 year old son struggled to understand and asked his father, "Is it okay for me to be angry with God?" Greg told him that was an appropriate response. Greg was then jostled when he heard the chaplain pray, "Since you have given Greg a share in your own passion, help him to find hope in suffering, for you are Lord forever and ever." A share in Christ's passion? Greg asked for his copy of the *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich (14th century English mystic). She expounds her experiences of God's tender and all-encompassing love for us, equating God's love with the love of a mother for her child and called God "our Mother in nature, our Mother in grace." Greg took solace in one of Julian's revelations where God promised her, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." (This story I found in a recent issue of *Americamedia*.)

We have no adequate explanations of how God's love interacts with human suffering. It is part of the human journey as lived in an evolving and imperfect world. One writer commented that starting around the nineteenth century suffering began to be understood as something negative and that it should be eliminated from the human experience, rather than something inevitable in one's

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lifetime. Richard Rohr connects the spiritual journey to how we respond to our suffering. He says that deep communion and deep compassion are formed much more by shared pain than by shared pleasure. The Black Protestant theologian, Howard Thurman, wrote, "Sometimes in the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, / We can hear the whisper in the heart / Giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair." (Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*).

There are many women all over the world such as nuns who have stayed in Iraq, Gaza, on the borders, to comfort people in their pain. They are courageous and loving. One college professor told me that her students are kind, loving, caring but have no concept of either sacrifice or suffering. They have grown up in an entitled culture. In such a culture of individualism, isolation and loneliness, so many are unaware that they are never alone. God became human and chose to take part in every dimension of humanity. Jesus did not suffer in Gethsemane and on the cross to pay a debt or satisfy the Father. Out of love for us, he suffered in love for us to be one with us in every human way. He is really One with us! Now each of us, as we live, rejoice, love, suffer and die are one with him. We are not alone. Our suffering is joined to his suffering and is never useless. We suffer thus with all living creatures on this planet who are suffering. Our suffering and theirs together. We are ONE.

Accordingly, we stand opposed to assisted suicide or euthanasia. No life is useless. No life is alone. In fact, the sick and suffering have much to teach the rest of us. We cannot just get rid of them. Yes, all the needed palliative care should be extended to ease pain but we have no right to take a human life. Perhaps we have to pay more attention to the suffering in their needs. Because suffering touches us so intimately in many ways, this reflection may be difficult to which to respond. But if you do have some thoughts, you can write me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.