

Commemoration of the Lord's Passion
April 10, 2020

Recently in a conference to the monastic community, I recounted a heart-wrenching scene in the book *Night*, by Eli Wessel. The book is based on his experiences with his father in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald during the height of the holocaust. The scene is the hanging of a young boy and as always the camp is forced to watch. Not heavy enough for the weight of his body to break his neck the boy dies slowly. Wessel recounts "behind me I heard a man asking where is God, where is He now, and I heard a voice within me answer him. Here he is. He is hanging on the gallow."

In times like these when we are faced with suffering and death, especially in the cruelest forms, we too would find ourselves asking as some may be doing today, "where is God? where is He now?" Elis Wessel without realizing it was given a profound insight into the mystery of the cross. The cross for us Christians proclaims, here is God. Here He is hanging on the cross. In the suffering and death of Christ, God is present to uphold and sustain every man and woman in their own suffering and death. For Christians, we believe that all suffering seen in the light of Christ's suffering and united to His suffering can be a channel to a deeper experience of God and his saving grace. It is always a paradox for the cross of Christ has two faces: it humiliates and it raises, it gives you death and it gives you life.

Perhaps these words written during the second world war by the English writer and mystic Caryll Houslander can illuminate this experience of the cross. They certainly can speak to the present experience of our world. She writes "one understands so well our dear Lord's prayer in Gethsemane his fear and his courage. But whatever happens in the future it seems to me that in this which we are experiencing he is saying fear not it is I." I cannot explain but several times today when I felt I could really cave

in suddenly right into the midst of myself, his voice seemed to say “fear not it is I” and I felt vaguely that somehow or other our becoming Christ - the consummation of our love for him has to take this form of knowing something of the passion so that even the feeling of fear and the awful moments when one wants to cry like a child, need not shame us because they are all part of Christ’s own experience in us!”

In His passion, Christ is jointed to us in our suffering in love and mercy. In the Passion account of St, John, Jesus freely embraces the cross as he himself declares, “no one takes my life from me. I freely lay it down.” This freedom to lay down his life, to give himself in sacrifice is formed by love, love that conquers. For Jesus, the cross is not so much an instrument of torture and death, but rather the sign of his victory over the power of sin and death and the way of his return to the Father in glory. Through his death on the cross, he conquers over our sin and our death and makes a way for us to go to the Father. He can transform each and every experience of suffering and death into an experience of himself in us.

For God to join himself to humanity in the incarnation was not enough. He had to go farther, he had to go to the depths, to the darkest depths of the human experience and there to save us by drinking fully of the cup of suffering and death. We venerate the cross because deep within it traveling through centuries a voice declared here is God. Here He is reigning from the cross. For here death and life contended in that conflict stupendous. The Prince of Life who dies reigns immortal.