March 16, Lent 2C (Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35)

We live with a clear-eyed hope that refuses to squint in the face of suffering.

by Mark Ralls in the March 2025 issue
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At a late summer fundraiser during the 2024 presidential campaign, President Trump expressed his preference for the Medal of Freedom (bestowed for outstanding public service) over the Medal of Honor (bestowed for bravery in combat). He lamented that the recipients of the latter are typically “in very bad shape” due to the wounds they have suffered and then went on to compliment his host—a recipient of the Medal of Freedom—for receiving her honor as a “healthy, beautiful woman.” His off-the-cuff remarks sparked rebuffs from veteran groups, but I didn’t see much critique from Christian leaders.

If there had been, this week’s reading from Philippians would have been a useful resource. Here, Paul tearfully concedes the presence of those who equate suffering with incompleteness and thus fail to fully embrace the good news of the cross. Paul’s heightened emotions are telling; they suggest that this passage is more pastoral theology than philosophical argument. Paul stands in the tradition of Jesus, who in the assigned gospel reading pours out his broken heart over Jerusalem’s “children” and yearns to shield them—“as a hen gathers her brood”—from the torments of his Passion. It is significant, I think, that in the end Jesus doesn’t try to cover their eyes.

Neither does Paul. Instead, he describes a contingent in the church of Philippi who turn away from suffering neighbors as those who “live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” Paul’s word choice is striking. These people in their midst are not intellectual opponents pitching false doctrine. They accept Christ, at least partially, while living as if his suffering has no instructional value in their lives. Paul presents himself as an alternative—not because he possesses innate superiority or secret knowledge but because he strives to live in accordance to the cruciform pattern of the Christ hymn (2:5–11). In the hymn, we encounter Christ not only humbling himself and becoming “obedient to the point of death” but also suffering specifically on a cross. Suffering is

not ancillary to Christ's saving work but integral to it.

In this week's reading, Paul moves from Christology to anthropology. His point seems to be that suffering is also integral for us as we work out our salvation in this life. We live with a clear-eyed hope that refuses to squint in the face of suffering. When Paul insists that Christ "will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory," it is implied that our present humiliations are not completely dissolved into future glory. They too have eternal significance. As Christ's glorified body still bears his wounds, so it seems will ours. Suffering may not be constitutive of our salvation, but neither is it accidental.

When President Trump admitted his preference for accolades without suffering, he was not consciously criticizing the cross. Yet he was undermining an essential part of its message. In the cross, we see God choosing to come alongside us even in our own brokenness. In those moments when we are acutely aware, this is more than reassuring. It is redemptive. The vast majority of human suffering garners the opposite of acclaim. It is a burden born in silence. Suffering lacks any heroic sense of honor because it seems to serve no higher purpose. It simply—and senselessly—happens to us. Yet, by grace, we are allowed to place the sordid story of our lives alongside the infinitely honorable story of Christ who chooses to suffer both for and with us. This bestows meaning that was not there before.

When my father-in-law was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, we wondered if the news had registered. "Are you alright?" my wife asked him.

"If you love me," he responded, "it will be OK." Our gain from the cross is not just the promise of a glorified end but also a more excellent way. We are invited to abide in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as we endure our own, and this, as Simone Weil says, "is a miracle more astonishing than walking on water, healing the sick or even the resurrection of the dead."

During Lent, as we sing of "clinging to the old rugged cross," several questions are worth considering. Do we cling to it in spite of the fact that it is "an emblem of suff'ring and shame" or because of it? What do we fail to see if we reserve our medals for only the healthy and the beautiful? And how might we live if we steadfastly refuse to turn away?