

Suffering

By Bishop George Khodr

No question is more painful than that about suffering; its causes, its purpose, its nature and its place in Man's existence. The person suffering can understand his own pain or he might not due to circumstances. Others might watch or explain and all they can give is compassion and affection. But the other cannot be in the shoes of him who suffers physically or morally because he cannot carry the pain of others.

There are some I know who carried several blows for decades; some blows were carried daily and others intermittently. There are some who live with suffering which the medics call an inability, like the bone maladies; and the doctors, in order to pacify him, tell the person that he would carry this pain to the grave. Concerning that Isaiah says: "At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see". This is accompanied with sorrow; and sorrow can bring one to inner pain and almost to despair. Added to those are worry, anxiety and tension. Such inner chagrins beside the physical ones reveal to us that they are exceptions to Man's basic criterion of living, that of wholeness and good health. This is so if you consider God's purpose in the Creation and Man's condition before sin. But what we have now is that every rational creature is stricken in soul or body or both at one stage of his life or throughout all of his life. One does not live the first wholeness of the creation but the defect that took place realizing that wholeness is only granted on the last day.

As you live on this earth you hope for the good and when you are wounded the loving folk around you help you morally and the doctors help you physically. Before that you are partially or fully defected in body, heart and soul and you do not move on towards good health and wholeness. Such wholeness is foreign to nature. But in Orthodox theology we know that the aim of our spiritual efforts is to reach Hesychia or quietness and peace associated with the freedom from lusts and thus one is freed morally from the impact of pain brought about by the defected body. And those who have reached such freedom are called the Hesychasts. So if you are free from the pressure of pain though you are crucified for it, you get to the first condition of the creation as if you are in Paradise before the fall of Adam or better still, you are in the coming Kingdom from now, or you are a beholder of Jesus Christ. There are those who have been granted salvation in this world; this does not mean that they do not experience temptation after such a transfiguration but when they go back to the transfiguration, they become of the Kingdom anew.

After death, we find Peace since it is not possible to fall after that; and the mercy of God receives us in its folds. But the man of Peace remains on this earth,

and also those who have no peace, until the love of God is poured on them profusely. Yes there is that grace of patience and we need to practice it as we discipline our soul so that we do not hurt others by complaining. You cannot tell your trouble except to those who are close to you because they can feel with you even though only the Lord is our healer.

One's end is not fated in the sense that you do not decide on it. Yes, we all fear death and many know that it is close but in general, no one can determine the time. In that sense death is a mystery that no one can breach. Someone I know had cancer and was told by the doctors that he had only three or four days to live. Fifteen years have gone by and the man is still alive. Did the doctors make a mistake? Did a miracle happen? Would God free man from the laws of nature? What is the law of nature? In my Church we believe that it is the order that God has set after the fall; and according to that law He runs our fallen nature except that He can free one from that law with His love thus carrying him to the condition of man before the fall, that in Paradise. This humanity is a field planted with wheat and tares and God will separate them on the last day. That same admixture is in the human heart also, but it is done away with through true repentance.

The question that often comes on the mouth of the afflicted is "why am I stricken? What have I done to God?" Thus people live their pain as a punishment. But it is not a punishment. And since God does not know hatred, anger and enmity, He does not throw you in the furnace of pain. God does not know revenge.

There is nothing wrong in saying with the Old Testament that God chastises with pain. But then this understanding is something between the afflicted and God and it is not right for you to read the suffering of others as chastisement. That is hatred and revenge on your part. Thus says Ezekiel: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "the parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? The one who sins is the one who will die." Ezek 18: 2, 4.

Does that mean that death has got to human nature because of sin? Here Paul says in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death. So the Bible says that every man is a sinner called to repentance. We do not know man except in the condition after the fall. We cannot believe that God has created man for death. Some would argue that death is a matter of potassium and mineral compounds and some diseases here and there; but both, the sick and those who are not sick die in similar ways: first their brain dies then the heart dies and so death remains a mystery for all. Actually Paul says that the wages of sin is death in the context of a discussion on holiness. He says in Romans 6: 20-23 "When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap

leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So Paul’s concern was not to link what is biologically natural in us with sin, but to urge people to freedom from sin in the new life in Christ.

The Christians do not have a philosophy of evil. We only know it as a lack of the good. We do not explain it or expound on it. All what we say is that there is evil and it is bound for death. That is why Jesus went down to the realm of death and remained there three days and trampled down death by his death. And when the Divine Life in Christ entered the realm of death, He placed in that realm of death Life Eternal. Our position therefore is not philosophical but one of spiritual warfare in the sense that when you are Christ’s friend through repentance, He pours down on you His divine power and would raise you from the dead and would forgive your sin. We only affirm that (Rev. 21: 2) “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

The problem of suffering in the Orthodox Church is resolved by that understanding mentioned above; as Christ trampled down death so your death now is trampled down in Ultimate Compassion in the Resurrection. This is why, in the afflictions of soul and body we have in this world, we should have our eyes on the One who has utterly overcome death and is able to overcome it in us; then we become a glorified body as he is; then we are in Christ.