

Life and Death; Suffering and Love

This time of year, Christians, and our society more broadly, observe and celebrate 'Holy Week' culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During Holy Week I often find myself reflecting upon life and death, upon suffering and love.

I once read somewhere and like to repeat at funerals that "grief cannot and does not exist except where there has been love". Grief is actually a privilege – a painful one at that – because it gives expression to the love that we have shared with the departed person. So, even though grief is one of our greatest sufferings, there is also a certain sweetness to it because it is linked to love.

Many of the events we Christians commemorate during Holy Week entailed much grief and suffering on the part of Jesus Christ: his unjust arrest and trial; being deserted by his friends and rejected by the crowds that a few days earlier had hailed him their king; his passion in which he was mocked, beaten, scourged, and crowned with thorns; carrying the heavy cross up Mount Calvary; and his crucifixion and death on the cross on Good Friday - the total gift of himself to us.

In all of these events the sufferings of Jesus are certainly very prominent. But Holy Week is not really about suffering, it's about loving. It was Jesus' love for God and love for you and me that brought him to his passion and death, and it was his love that opened the way for our redemption. His suffering was a consequence of his loving. And his loving suffering is redemptive: it picks us up; it elevates us; it redeems us.

The love of God calls for a response from each of us, and the only adequate response to love is love; a love that is true and faithful; a love that is patient and kind; a love that generates peace and joy; a love that binds people together.

Love and suffering. There is suffering in every person's life. Blessed are they whose suffering is a consequence of their loving, for their loving suffering lifts people up and has redemptive power to restore goodness and heal relationships.

Of course, the culmination of Jesus' life was not his death on the cross but his resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday – the sign he said he would give to prove that he is indeed who he said he is – the very Son of God; the God of love and mercy who saves us from sin and promises eternal life.

Here in Jesus' death and resurrection we find the greatest of the Christian paradoxes – that death is actually the beginning of life! Or, as Jesus put it on various occasions: the grain of wheat must die in order to give life to the rich harvest of new and more grains of wheat; and the one who clings to life will lose it but the one who lays down their life will find it.

Dying to oneself is actually more simple than many people realize. Saint Paul gave us the answer when he said that "Love is patient; love is kind." Being patient by accepting the limitations of others (while being conscious that others are being patient with our own

limitations); and being kind, by getting up and doing things to help others, is the simplest of recipes for dying to oneself and finding the fulness of life.

Holy Week is the holiest and most solemn week of the Christian year. Days like Good Friday are solemn days, not sad ones. And days like Easter Sunday are pure joy!

As we approach Easter, may we each take some time to reflect prayerfully on the life and death, suffering and love of Jesus Christ. May we see in his life and experience in our own life the beautiful link between suffering and love and between life and death.

May you know the love of God for you this Easter, and may you respond to his love with your own love.

I wish you, your family, and loved ones a truly Happy Easter.

Bishop Michael Kennedy

Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle