

A cross that is bearable

I think we all have our mental pictures of the great characters in the Scriptures. Whenever Jesus is looking for a response Peter always seems to be centre stage. I picture him like those children in school who always have their hands up even before the teacher has finished the question. They may not always get the answer right, but they are desperate to please. Peter loves the Lord passionately, but often he messes up, getting it wrong and ultimately fails dramatically when he denies Jesus during the passion.

But for all that, we know that Jesus loves him and ultimately trusts him; indeed entrusts him with the leadership of the whole community. That moving encounter after the resurrection when Jesus asks him three times whether he loves him, wipes out the memory of the betrayals. Peter is asked to feed the sheep and he does not hesitate to move on and take up his cross in the service of the whole Church.

It is fascinating that it was not long after Peter had answered the Lord's question, 'Who do you say I am?' with his great profession of faith, 'You are the Christ', that Peter was remonstrating with the Lord over the dangers of going to Jerusalem and was firmly told that in doing so he was an obstacle, acting for Satan.

The prospect of pain and suffering is something that naturally we shun and seek to avoid. Look at how miserable Jeremiah is over his lot as a prophet, having to bear the insults of the people to the point where he just wants to run away and forget the whole project. Yet he admits that something burns in his heart, a force difficult to overcome, that drives him on. Of course the fact is that none of us can escape suffering and pain in some form during our lives, and as always Jesus engages us by suggesting that we look at the paradox of our experience.

It often happens that Jesus turns our human way of thinking upside down: 'Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.' The fact is that the more selfishly preoccupied we become about our lives, the more protection we have to put in place to try and avoid anything going wrong. By contrast if we can free ourselves from that kind of anxiety and spend ourselves in the service of others, we know that no matter what the problems, we can find a peace and contentment, that is God's precious gift and that makes all the suffering worthwhile.

I never cease to stand in awe of those who, in faith and with patience, bear the cross of terminal illness or some other seemingly intolerable burden. It seems as though that irresistible force that Jeremiah speaks of, gives them the knowledge that their sufferings can be united with Christ's and so take on a new and eternal significance.

Pray to carry your cross graciously, and remember Jesus promised to make the burden light when we bring it to him.