

CHAPTER FOUR



THE COST

“Take Up Your Cross”

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

MATTHEW 11:28–30

All that exists, heaven and earth, was created by God’s word. There is nothing that is not spoken by God. God has spoken the Word and through the Word of God everything has life.

All that exists is created by the Word of God. God has spoken to us.

The Word of God—Jesus—became flesh, became one among us, living in a small town in a small country, somewhere on one of the planets in our solar system.

The Word through which all is created became a person called Jesus.

What this means is so beautifully expressed by St. Paul when he says that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, did not cling to his divine privileges of being the One in whom all is created, but emptied himself and became as one of us. And more than that, he not only became as one of us, but he was obedient to death, a death on the cross.

God in whom all is created stripped himself of his divinity. That is, he didn't cling to divine privileges; he chose to become One among us. He was One who wanted to live our life to the full extent of what that means. That is, One who wanted to die with us. One that wanted to experience our human condition in the body. One that wanted to go with us to the absurdity of death.

Death is so absurd. Who of us can really grasp it? We want life and yet there is a certainty of death. God wanted to enter with us into that absurdity of death and feel the human condition more fully and more totally than we ourselves can.

He made it visible by dying the most absurd death. The Holy One nailed naked on a cross between two criminals. That is the unspeakable mystery that we as Christians believe.

But do we really?

God in whom all is created was hung as if he were a sinner on the cross. He is cast out and destroyed. And,

in that way, God became more deeply united with humanity than we ourselves can believe.

I want you to hear this one sentence. It is very important. It comes from the Gospel of John. "When I am lifted up from the earth," Jesus says (as on the cross and also as lifted up in the resurrection), "I shall draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). This means that the divine movement of death and resurrection is a movement in which all human flesh has been lifted up. It means that all humanity has been drawn into that mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. It means that in Jesus' death all human mortality, brokenness, illness, sickness, confusion, agony, and loneliness have been embraced. It means that there is no human being anywhere in the world who is not lifted up on the cross with Jesus.

If it is true that Jesus on the cross is the Word in whom all is created, then we are all lifted up with Christ on the cross. All of human flesh—whether we are children, teenagers, young adults, mature people, elderly people; whether we are from the United States, Russia, Asia, Africa, Ireland, Nicaragua; whether we are prisoners or free people; whether we are people at war or people at peace; whether we are poor people or rich people—are all lifted up in that event on Golgotha. Not just people of this world here and now, but also the people of the generations, people from the centuries before Christ and also centuries ahead of us, of which we don't know the end. All the people—past, present, and

future—have been lifted up in that mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

All of humanity has been nailed on the cross. There is no suffering, whether it is loneliness, anger, pain, or rejection, that has not been suffered by God. Because of that, we, with our anger, with our pain, with our struggles, are in God and lifted up through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Risen Lord is the Lord in whose body we have been gathered. All of humanity.

There is great hope in this understanding. This is the secret to seeing Jesus as the manifestation of God's compassion.

Do you know where the word "compassion" comes from? It comes from the Latin *com*, which means "with," and *passio*, "to suffer." "To suffer with" is compassion. Jesus manifests to us that God is a God who suffers with all of us. There is no human suffering in you or anyone else in the world that has not been suffered by God. Consolation begins with this knowing. God is suffering all human suffering.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for compassion is *rachum*. That word is taken from the root word *rechem*, which means "womb." God, hence, is a mother who suffers the suffering of her children in her womb.

In the Gospel, in the original Greek, when Jesus says he had pity, the text really says he had compassion. He felt the agony and pain of the people in his guts, in his viscera, in his interior organs. He suffered so deeply,

he was so moved, that when he saw the widow of Nain and her child who was to be buried, he had compassion (Luke 7:11–17). He experienced the agony and pain of this mother, this widow, this lonely woman, so deeply that he raised the child from the dead. His compassion became a movement of life.

The great event in Nain is not so important because Jesus performed a miracle. The great event is that Jesus felt the suffering of that woman—*as deeply as that woman herself felt it*—and therefore it became a movement, a movement of life. It was a suffering with this woman in unity that was life-giving and that brought the child back again as a gift to his mother.

God's compassion for all human suffering is exactly what becomes visible on the cross. What this means is that we are called to see God's suffering in the people. Every time we see someone in pain and we wonder how that person is going to live through it, know that God suffered that pain and is suffering that pain with that person. In a way, the whole of history is the showing of the depth of God's suffering. From a Christian perspective, history is the unfolding of the intensity and immensity of God's suffering, but also of God's resurrection, because in the midst of all the suffering, you can see signs of hope again and again and again.

Our Cross

If we follow the news in the morning we might wonder how anyone can eat their breakfast and go to work. There is so much pain in all the reports. I think to myself, "If I take this really seriously how can I ever do anything?" I hear about war, famine, terrorism, and environmental disasters, and I think, "If I focus too much on this, how can I live?" Sometimes the only way to survive is to become numb and say, "I can't pay attention to all that. It is too much. It is beyond my control. I've got my own problems."

Or there is anger. If, for example, on Sunday morning the minister talks about all the problems of the world and all week long we have been hearing about them, and then on Sunday morning they are there again, we feel powerless. "What do you want us to do about it?" We get upset, nervous, and angry, and it doesn't help anyone and often leads to inaction on our part. We might even want to shout, "Why can't you say some nice things instead?"

Confrontation with human suffering does not lead to compassion. It leads to anger, numbness, irritation, and rejection, because we don't know how to deal with it all. It is too much. It is a heavy burden—more than we can carry.

Then there are the small sufferings that become a heavy burden. These sufferings can sometimes be worse and have more power over us.

These are the small things that can just get to us and

bother us the whole day. They can occupy us—an irritating boss, traffic, an unfriendly gesture, a word of rejection, mistakes at work. These are small things, but they can take our joy away. The little things become heavy burdens because they occupy us and take a place in our heart.

Then we feel overburdened. We often say, “If I just had that thing gone I’d be fine.” But there is always just one thing. Everybody has some thorn in the flesh. Everyone has something that makes them suffer in some way. Though it may not be apparent at first, every human heart carries a deep pain. Sometimes the small crosses seem even harder to bear than the large crosses. The church is supposed to be so full of love, but sometimes in a church there are people who hate each other. In your circle and community there is jealousy and anger and it seems to be unbearable. Just where you expect love there is conflict and pain.

And that is when we feel disconnected from God. A burden becomes a heavy burden when it doesn't feel connected to anything else. It is a burden that we have to carry by ourselves and is not shared. It is not part of anything larger. It just sits there and presses us down, down, down.

Jesus says, “Take up your cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23). He says, “Take up my burden. It is the burden of the whole world and it will be a light burden. Take up my yoke and it will prove to be an easy yoke” (Matthew 11:30).

This is the mystery of the Christian life. It is not that God came to take our burden away or to take our cross away or to take our agony away. No. God came to invite us to connect our burden with God's burden, to connect our suffering with God's suffering, to connect our pain to God's pain.

The great invitation of the Christian life is to live a life of connectedness with the Son of God who died broken. It is an invitation to dare to live connected to God who wants to give us his burden as a light burden because it is a burden that God has already carried for us.

There is more. Not only is God compassionate with us, but we have to be willing to be compassionate with God. We have to *compati* with God. *Compati* is Latin for "suffer with"—we need to suffer with God.

The invitation to suffer with God is probably the most profound thing that we see in the Christian tradition. Compassion means not only that God suffers with us but that now we are invited to suffer with God.

St. Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross speak about compassion. They speak about the mystery of suffering with Christ. They speak about their suffering as a participation in God's suffering, and by that connectedness their suffering loses its absurd quality. It is still painful. It is still hard. It is still agonizing. It is still difficult. It is still lonely. But connected with the cross it becomes something new.

Look at the man who is pierced and broken and you see the love of God radiating out to you. You feel the warmth and the newness streaming through you. Every time you look at your struggles, your pain, and your anguish as the burden you have to bear, see your struggles as being struggled with right there on the cross by the Son of God. Your struggle becomes a light burden because it is the burden of God and God has suffered for us.

To “take up the cross” does not mean to look for pain. It doesn’t mean to go after the cross. It does not mean to search for a problem. We have a lot of problems. We don’t need more. Sometimes we think that to “take up the cross” means to be hard on ourselves. That is not what Jesus says. To “take up the cross” means first of all to acknowledge where we are suffering, to recognize it.

Sometimes we focus on the big problems. I think we should start with focusing on our small problems.

We are suffering almost every moment of our life. There is always something that is a little hard. There is always some pain there that we sort of walk right over and don’t take very seriously. But that pain is a cross. Are we taking it up? Are we acknowledging it? Are we saying yes? Often, it seems as if we are always willing to carry another type of cross than the one we already have.

“That person didn’t speak to me today. It is not a big

deal but it hurts a little bit. This is a cross, a small one, but I acknowledge it as a cross.”

“I didn’t hear from my friend. That hurts a little bit. I don’t need to walk right over these hurts as though they don’t exist.”

What is so remarkable is that just being able to see these little struggles allows us slowly to come home to our own house and not be so scared that something more fearful might come. We don’t have to be afraid, because we are already able to acknowledge our struggle. We are familiar with it.

Jesus says, “Take up your cross.” He didn’t say, “Make up your cross,” “Create your cross,” or “Go after your cross.” He said, “Take up your cross,” and this means to have the courage to see your pain.

We live in a culture that constantly denies these interior pains. It doesn’t hurt any less.

We say, “My friend died. I have to be strong.”

It is very painful. There was a time when people mourned for a long time. They felt their pain and let the fruits of grief grow in them.

There are a lot of places where we are really in pain. Let us not ignore it. Let us not deny it but say, “Yes, this is difficult and I pick it up.”

Acknowledge it. Say, “This is where I feel pain. It is my life and my life also means my pain. Can I stay with this? Can I recognize it and say yes? I can live this life. I want to live this life. It is painful and it has unique hurts

but it is mine. I want to embrace it because I will never taste joy in life if I keep ignoring my pain.”

It is the first thing that Jesus asks. He says, “Take up your cross. Take it up.”

“Follow me.” That is the second thing he asks.

Jesus says, “Make the carrying of your cross part of your discipleship. Connect it with me. Connect it with God’s way.”

We are called—we are urged—to bring our pain into the healing presence of the cross. That is what a life of prayer is all about. We pray when we say, “Lord, it hurts not to be liked by people that I love. I see how rejected you were and I want my experience of rejection to be connected with you.”

Or we pray, “Lord, I am so fearful today. I don’t know where it comes from, but I am anxious and fearful. It is there. Lord, I want to bring it into your presence and bring it right into the Garden of Gethsemane and connect it with your anguish so that my fear becomes your struggle. The struggle to live.”

Somehow we have to have the courage to say, “My body aches, Lord. I am in physical pain. I don’t know why the doctors can’t help with the pain. But I want to know that you know what physical pain is too, and that you are a God who has a body that has risen, and in that body the wounds were visible. Wounds in your hands. Wounds in your feet. Wounds in your side. Let my woundedness become part of your woundedness so

that my woundedness does not make me bitter or resentful, angry or upset, but brings me in touch with the mystery of your death and resurrection. I bring into your presence my whole being. I bring to you all my anguish and pain. Let my cross merge with yours. My burden becomes your burden and the experience fills me with new life and new hope.”

That is what prayer is.

I worry a lot. You worry a lot. There are a lot of things we agonize over. We worry about tomorrow and yesterday, this person and that person. But are we really connecting it all? Are we bringing it into the present?

Bring it to the One who has already suffered through it all and has lifted it up in his Risen body.

Are you really making that connection so that something new can happen?

If that connection is being made, something new is being born. Every time a connection is made between us and the light of God, something new happens, some kind of renewal takes place in us. Every time we keep our pain isolated or hidden—“I am too embarrassed about it,” “I can’t tell anyone, it is too silly”—the burden becomes bigger and heavier.

When we pray, we connect our whole life with God’s life. God’s love can flow through our veins—our spiritual veins—through our heart and our being. We will discover a whole new way of being. We can live our struggles in a completely new way. All distinctions

we make about our well-being—"I am happy," "I am sad"—can in some way be transcended into something very new.

Take your worries and convert them into prayer. Take your fear and connect it with God's fear. Take your depression and see it in the presence of God's dying on the cross. Bring it to the Presence who has suffered all and lived it all. You will discover that in the presence of Jesus you can live beyond pain and joy, sadness and gladness. When you pray, you connect your life with God's life. You live in a new way.

One time I was extremely depressed. I felt very sad about everything. I was in Flagstaff, Arizona, so I decided to go to the Grand Canyon. I saw billions of years of creation and realized that if those years represented an hour, I had been born not in the last second but in a tiny fraction of the last second.

Looking out, I thought, "My dear. Why all these problems?" Looking at the Grand Canyon, at that enormous abyss of beauty, the strange depression fell away. I felt the silence. In the face of this natural wonder, I thought, "What are you worrying about? As if you are carrying the burden of the world—a world that survived before you, and is something that will go on a long time after you. Why don't you just enjoy your life and really live it?"

This image of the Grand Canyon stayed with me for a long time. God is like the Grand Canyon. God

suffered the wound, the wound of all humanity, and if I enter into the presence of that wound, my wound becomes a light burden or a light pain. Not because it is not there but because it has been embraced by love. I can live my pain and not be destroyed by it. I can acknowledge my pain and not be paralyzed by it. The Grand Canyon invited me to enter an abyss of divine love and to experience that I am immensely loved and cared for. I was invited to enter life with a new heart, with God's heart.

MANY OF US, if we are following Jesus at all, follow out of fear. But if we follow out of fear—fear of hell, of purgatory, of rejection, of not being acceptable—that is not following. Following Jesus cannot be a form of discipleship if it is out of fear. There is a lot of fear in us. Sometimes it overwhelms me how fearful we truly are.

We ask, "What happens if I don't follow him?"

"What will happen when I finally go up there? What am I going to say?"

Maybe we don't admit it, but sometimes we say, "Well, following Jesus is the safe way to go; you never know what is going to happen."

Jesus does not want us to follow him out of fear. He wants us to follow him out of love. Throughout the New Testament we hear, "Don't be afraid." An angel says it to Zechariah (Luke 1:13). An angel says it to Mary

(Luke 1:30). The angels at the tomb of the resurrection of Jesus say, "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:5). Jesus himself says, "Do not be afraid, it is I. Where I am you should not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27).

Fear is not of God, because God is the God of first love. As John says so beautifully, "First love casts out all fear" (1 John 4:18). The love of God is the perfect love that breaks through the boundaries of our fear. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. Keep your eyes focused on me. Follow me."

Remember that last beautiful scene in the Gospel of John where Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, do you love me?" and Peter says, "Lord, you know I love you." Jesus asks a second time, "Simon, do you love me?" and Peter says, "You know I do." Jesus asks a third time, and Peter becomes rather disturbed. "Lord, you know I love you." "Okay, disciple," Jesus says, "feed my lambs, feed my sheep" (John 21:15–17). Then Jesus says the most important thing for us to hear right now. He says, "When you were young you girded yourself and you went where you wanted to go and when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you and lead you where you would rather not go" (John 21:18).

Jesus means, "When you are in love, when you are really in love, you can be guided to places that you have not chosen yourself. The person who loves can go to places where she or he would rather not go."

Jesus turns all psychology upside down.

He doesn't say, "When you are young you stretch out your hands and let other people gird you and when you grow old then you can do your own thing." No. Jesus says it the other way. He says, "When you are young you can do what you want to do and when you are old you will be led where you'd rather not go."

TRUST The spiritual life is a life in which we are more and more able to be led, to be guided to hard places, to places we would rather not go. For Jesus it was the cross. For Peter it was the cross. For Paul and all the disciples, it meant a lot of suffering. It is not masochism. It is not self-flagellation. It is not being hard on ourselves. It is being in love. It is being so fully and so totally in love that we go to places we would rather not go.

The interesting thing is that when we are in love we don't feel the pain in the way that other people think we would. If we are truly in love, our eyes are not focused on what hurts. Our eyes are focused on the person we love. We make one step, and another step, and another step, and another step. A mother or a father says, "Of course I will stay with my child who is sick. I love my child. I am not going to leave my child alone." Other people might say, "They are really suffering." But they have the energy to stay with their child who is ill, because they love their child so much.

When we are in love we can go to very difficult places and feel, not the pain first of all, but the love.

I am not saying that there is no suffering. I am only saying that our attention is not focused on it. Other

people might say, "Oh, my dear, what suffering. What agony. How could anyone do all of that? It is terrible. I wouldn't be able to do it." From the outside their ability to live the suffering might look like an impossible feat.

When we go to work with the poorest of the poor or with people who are dying or in misery, or we give up a job to do other critical things, people might say, "My God, I don't know how you do it." Many of us can reply, "I am alive. It is easy. I don't see all those problems that you are speaking of. I am just following. I am guided to all these places that never in my life would I have thought I would go to."

A mother might have a child who is so sick that she has to stay with her for her whole life. She thought she could never handle losing her freedom in this way. Everyone asks her how she can do it. She says, "I can do it. I am not scared. I am in love. I am following."

Following the One with whom we are in love is the full meaning of following Jesus. We follow not out of fear but out of love.



Dear Lord,

Give me eyes to see and ears to hear. I know
there is light in the darkness that makes
everything new. I know there is new life

in suffering that opens a new earth for me.
I know there is a joy beyond sorrow that
rejuvenates my heart. Yes, Lord, I know that
you are, that you act, that you love, that you
indeed are Light, Life, and Truth.

People, work, plans, projects, ideas,
meetings, buildings, paintings, music, and
literature can only give me real joy and peace
when I can see and hear them as reflections of
your presence, your glory, your kingdom.

Let me then see and hear. Lord, show me
your vision, become a guide in life and impart
meaning to all my concerns.

AMEN

(from The Only Necessary Thing)