

The Reality of Jesus' Wounds as a Clue to Christian Discipleship

"Unless I See the Marks of the Nails in His Hands..."

John 20:19-31

By

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Paradoxically, sadly but joyfully, in Thomas' geographical imagination, what has become a site of gloom and tragedy in the body of Christ has turned into a site of joy and glory:

"Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

The site of tragedy and decay has become a symbol of insight into new life. In joy and tragedy, where life has been shattered a garden of risen life springs. In John's symbolism, the wounds of Christ are a spring of grace that transforms the story of pain and agony into a story of joy. For Thomas, the possibility to reveal the geographical site in the body of Christ, where the marks of the nails are found leads into the certainty of Christian faith. The marks of the nails and the pangs in his side become the sites of memory that authenticate the journey of the Christian story towards its final purpose beyond calvary, where Christ, the crucified Messiah, by his resurrection, overcomes the power of death and inaugurates new life.

John's symbolic way of putting the story of grace as epitomized in Thomas' intriguing perplexity and apparent confusion, is a living testimony that the wounds of Christ are intended to reaffirm and strengthen our faith. For that reason, as we face the gloomy tragedy brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, we can take today's symbolism as a faith affirming story, a clue, that brings in a very catching way, the reality of divine revelation and presence in the face of tragedy. We cannot underestimate the ferocity of this tragedy. We know how harsh this pandemic has been so far. Ironically, in spite of what the pandemic may turn out to be, the wounds of Christ bring peace and joy in the face of tragedy:

When it was even on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord (John 20:19-20).

Indeed, the marks of the nails in his hands and the mark of the wounds in his side bring peace and joy. Still, oddly enough, the other disciples saw and believed at first sight; but for Thomas we need to see and touch in order to believe! At the core of John's symbolism, the wounds of Christ constitute a clue to Christian discipleship. Faith is a process, in fact those who have gone before us saw theology as faith seeking understanding. Thomas's insistent irony and apparent bewilderment in the story as is told by his fellow disciples about the good of Jesus' resurrection, is John's way of trying to reaffirm the importance of human misunderstanding, uncertainty, and hesitation as part of the clue that leads into a complete understanding of the story of Jesus as a story of salvation and grace:

A week later his disciples were again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe. Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have

you believed because you have seen me ? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe (John 20:26-29).

If we read between the lines, will come to full understanding that the real Thomas is not the one in the story but ourselves. The Thomas of the story is only here, as an intercessor, to facilitate our own understanding of the story, to give us courage and joy in the face of tragedy. This Gospel comes at a very crucial time that testes our own faith. When the frail timber of our humanity in which we cling on is test. Fear and anxiety prevent us from seeing Thomas in ourselves in order to be part of this great invitation in which, like Thomas, we are invited by Christ to share in his risen life. Christ invites Thomas to put his finger there and see his hands. Invites him to reach out his hand and put it in his side. Not to doubt but believe. Is it not ironic that the Gospel is shared when we, ourselves, find it hard to reach out to each other? How can we reach out our hand and put it in one another's side in the context of social distancing we are called to abide to? How can we reach out, when the pandemic we face forces us to isolate ourselves as a way of reaching out? As Thomas, ourselves, are we really going to take it and put our fingers here and see his hands? Are we really going to reach out our hand and put it in side without inflicting Jesus more pain and agony?

In the context of the pandemic will it not be fair to understand the need to reach out as a call for social distancing and isolation in order to save our lives as we strive in saving the lives of others? Yes, the Christian story stands beyond tragedy but is also a recipe for tragedy, for it seems to point that Transfiguration and Golgotha are intertwined. Hence, it can only save us from tragedy if we, ourselves, acknowledge the reality of tragedy. As, the late American theologian and Lutheran pastor, Reinhold Niebuhr, reminds us, "if there are tears for this man on the cross they cannot be tears of 'pity and terror.'" But also tears that inspire those who lament to see new possibilities beyond the gloom. For Niebuhr, "[t]he cross does not reveal life at cross purposes with itself. On the contrary, it declares that what seems to be an inherent tragedy in life itself is really a contingent flaw in the soul of humanity, the flaw of evil we commit in our own freedom. For Niebuhr, if we can realise that, if we can 'weep for ourselves', we can also realise that we are not here only for ourselves, but also for one another and in order to make a positive difference in this world. To leave it in much better shape than we found it, as we striving in caring for one another. For Niebuhr, this very man on the cross who can say 'Weep not for me' is also able to save us from our tears of 'self-pity' into tears of compassion, love, and justice.

Thomas' realisation that this Jesus was indeed his Lord and his God ("My Lord and my God!") it is a total outpouring of faith that, in the complexity of Christian discipleship, unless we surrender our pride, will never be able to understand what it means to put our finger here and see his hands. In fact, in the context of the pandemic, we need tears that gives us the courage and insight we need to understand what it means to put our finger here and see his hands in the context of the pandemic we face. What it means to reach out our hand and put it in his side in the context of the social distancing and self-isolations we called to abide. To reach out our hand and put it in his side should lead us into full realisation that we have to isolate ourselves not in order to save ourselves but to save the lives of others, as we strive to save our own lives. To the contrary, the wounds of Christ, as a clue to Christian discipleship, tells us that we may see ourselves inflicting more pain in Him as we put our finger in His wound and hurt Him more, by ignoring the recommendations that take to slow down the spread of the pandemic.

Amen