

Suffering and the Servant of the Lord

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Uncertain Future: Source of Suffering

Faced with the prospect of political change, obsessed with worries about Hong Kong's economy and the rise in the cost of living, Hong Kong people have the feeling these days that life is very stressful. The prospect of 1997 with its anticipated upheaval has made many ask: Should we emigrate? In fact, emigration has become a common trend especially among the economically well-off. 62,000 Hong Kong residents emigrated in 1990 alone. The decision to leave Hong Kong to go live in uncertainty in a strange but free country requires great sacrifice. It often means having to leave one's family and friends behind, and giving up one's social status because of the high probability that professionals from Hong Kong will be unable to find work at their present professional or management levels.



Once people emigrate, there is always the question: Should we return? The prospect of returning is generally filled with anxiety and stress. It can mean coming back empty handed and having to start all over again. Still others compromise by becoming "astronauts". This decision splits up the family with the husband and father working in Hong Kong while the family resides in a host country or vice versa. This is an attempt to solve either the economic or immigration problem but requires commuting between both places. This often creates a family crisis.

For those who choose to stay or do so because they have no other alternative--fully 90% of the population--there is the menacing shadow of the motherland's dictatorship, lack of development and the possible subsequent suffering. Most people

in Hong Kong see neither the value of their serving the Motherland nor what benefit suffering can have for themselves or others.

Compulsion to Succeed: Source of Suffering

Another source of suffering in Hong Kong today is the compulsion to succeed. This is evident in the striving after money, for a better and more comfortable life and for a good education, all of which create a tremendous spirit of competition. The compulsion to succeed, whether academically or in business, and the ever-present spirit of competition give rise to feelings of insecurity and inferiority. Success creates stress and fears about not being able to maintain or even improve a social status. Failure to succeed gives rise to defense mechanisms and feelings that no one understands. When alone, people are often unable to face themselves and are filled with emptiness, anxiety, emotional instability and powerlessness. It is difficult for them to see the light at the end of the tunnel. How should the Christian cope with these conditions? Faced with suffering, what should be the attitude of the Hong Kong Christian? I think the best answer can be found in the role of the *suffering servant* as described in the Bible.

Suffering and the Old Testament

In the Old Testament suffering is either a consequence of sin or a divine punishment which can entail collective or personal guilt. The sufferings of the Servant of the Lord described according to Deutero-Isaiah was interpreted as punishment for his own sin.

In 587 B.C. Judah had fallen. The king of Judah and the Jews were deported to Babylon. This experience of suffering caused the Jews to waver in their faith in the Davidic Kingdom, in the Temple and in the promised land. Some even began to doubt Yahweh's existence altogether. Others reflected on their own personal sin and the sin of their own people. However, the punishment of deportation seemed excessive and out of proportion to their sins. They lost their ground for hope. At this critical moment in their faith-life, and to strengthen and console them, Deutero-Isaiah puts before the people the salvific figure of

the Suffering Servant (cf. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13 to 53:12).

The Suffering Servant

The Servant was born in a "dry land", without the blessing of the Lord. Suffering became the distinctive mark of his life. His ignominy was interpreted as a sign that God had withdrawn his blessing from him because of his sins.¹ Although he was totally consumed by the fulfillment of his mission, people avoided him, believing him to be under a curse. Humiliation and ill treatment were his rewards and the Lord did not vindicate him. Loneliness and misunderstanding were his companions. Finally, he died as a common criminal and was buried alongside of sinners. Everything indicated that God had condemned and abandoned him totally.

For his part, the Servant knew that he attentively listened to the Word of God and fulfilled his mission in humility. He did not seek to gain attention from others, nor did he impose his words on his listeners. He was compassionate to the weak and oppressed. He confronted violence with non-violence. Perfectly submissive to his contemporaries and to the divine will, he was like a gentle lamb or sheep. Throughout his suffering, the Servant had faith in Yahweh, who is the Lord of history. He believed that his cause was with Yahweh who would never go back on his word. When he was thwarted, he trusted not in his own efforts but abandoned himself into the arms of Yahweh. Moreover, he encouraged others to trust in and abandon themselves to God. The Servant's trust in Yahweh was firm throughout humiliation and hostility and until he had completed the work God had given him to do.

Suffering was in God's plan for the Servant. The Servant was chosen by God before he was born. The Lord took pleasure in him and sent his spirit upon him² so that he might proclaim Yahweh's justice, carry the burden of sin and offer his life in atonement for sin. Through his punishment on behalf of all, the Servant won peace, pardon, and reconciliation with God for all of humankind.³

The Suffering Messiah

The suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah finds fulfillment in

the suffering of the Messiah, Christ, who shows us that suffering is a means or an instrument that reveals the mysterious ways of God. He, the poor man of Nazareth, who died on the cross as a criminal, was the presence of God at work in the world founding the Kingdom of God. This was the same Jesus who one day will come again in divine glory and authority, and in whom resides the union of majesty and humility.

From the very beginning of his life, Jesus was not accepted by his people. In St. John's Gospel, whenever Jesus reveals his glory, he is rejected by the Jews. Their rejection even brought him to his death. They preferred Barabbas and Caesar and crucified the Son of God who was innocent. The disciples failed to understand Jesus when he spoke of suffering. Soon after the second prophecy of the passion, they argued as to which of them was the greatest. During Jesus' trial and passion all the disciples either denied or abandoned him.

According to John the "hour" of his suffering was the "hour" of his glorification. When Jesus was acknowledged by Pilate as "the King of the Jews", he was brought out to be acclaimed by his people. With a crown on his head, he was crucified between two men in the position of honour as a king. With his inscription Pilate declared that Jesus was the universal king, a declaration he was unwilling to alter.⁴ This was a revelation of the presence and power of God among the people and a true manifestation of the mystery of God.

According to John the death of Christ was to enable all those who believe in him to have eternal life (Jn. 3:15) and to draw all to himself. This is symbolized by Mary and John who represent all of humankind saved and born again under the cross.⁵ Christ's salvation effects not only liberation from the slavery of sin, but also endows us with the grace of adopted children and implies the communion of all creation.

The above-mentioned Scripture revelation shows that the cross is the sign of the presence of God who is compassionate, who always sides with the suffering.⁶ We who have this faith conviction should not be afraid of suffering or of human frailty or allow ourselves to be disturbed by our weakness. If we can only accept that our good will is not enough, that we are still very poor, then we can admit that we cannot trust ourselves and so place ourselves into the hands of God. Jesus after praying in the garden, received the strength he needed to face his suffering.

John Paul II says that only those aware of their own poverty are interiorly capable of understanding the poverty of God who is infinitely rich. God, the rich one, can be fully expressed only through poverty.⁷

Convinced that he was defended by God, the servant of Deutero-Isaiah had the courage to face trials and suffering. Before his public ministry and passion, Jesus also had similar deep experiences of the love of God. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17; 17:5). In other words, to overcome trials people need deep faith experiences. The point is not so much that we love God as that we believe in God's love and in his loving presence. Though we are powerless, Christ's love urges us on, enabling us to do even greater works than Jesus did (Jn. 14:12). Changes in forms of government and economic difficulties are means to reinforce our trust in God's love enabling God to accomplish a great work in us.

Conclusion

Suffering is everyone's lot. If we opt to struggle against or escape suffering we become restless. Only in the light of faith can we have a different perspective and freely respond to God. In so doing we can share in the Paschal mystery of Christ. For without the pain of giving birth, there is no life. Without death, there is no resurrection. Without the willingness of the Hong Kong people to suffer there is no future either for Hong Kong or China. Therefore, instead of permitting ourselves to live in fear and anxiety, let us make use of the present moment. For the present moment is a sacrament; it is God's grace to us. Let us treasure and sanctify the "present moment" after the example of Jesus who accepted suffering and completed the Paschal mystery.

Notes

1. The choosing of the servant is usually accompanied by an outpouring of the Spirit as happened in the cases of the charismatic leaders of the O.T. as Saul (1 Sm 9:17); David (1 Sm 16:12-13). *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Is 41:1 (b).
2. In the O.T. those chosen by God or blessed by God possess beauty, e.g. Joseph, David, Saul, etc., Ackroyd, Peter R., *Israel under Babylon and Persia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
3. According to some ancients, the family, tribe or a people are a unity.

When someone sins, the one with whom he is in fellowship can intervene as his redeemer. The more eminent the deliverer is, the more valuable is his action on behalf of the other. Mowinkel, Sigmund, *He that Cometh*, translated by G.W. Anderson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956.

4. Pilate, by writing the inscription of Jesus in three languages, proclaimed him as the universal King.
5. Ignace, De la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*, translated by Dom Gregory Murray, Middlegreen: St. Paul Publications, 1989, pp. 33-34.
6. Andrew Hamilton, "The Cross: Sign of Hope", *The Way*, October, 1987, pp. 247-255.
7. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Donum*, Vatican, Polyglot Press, 1984, p.33.

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Ordinations in Wuhan

Sixteen priests were ordained in Wuhan on 19 May by Bishop Dong Guangqing. The priests are from 9 different dioceses and had studied at the Wuhan Regional Seminary. This was the largest number ordained in any one group since the churches began to re-open in 1979. Four priests and a group of Catholics from Hong Kong together with about 1000 parishioners attended the ceremony.

