Human Suffering and the New Creation

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The mystery of suffering, which so disturbs the idealist as an unnecessary aberration in the created order, is the subject of several reflections in St. Paul's writings. For the Christian, any physical or spiritual anguish should be seen in the light of the Paschal Mystery. Pain or affliction should take on a new meaning when integrated into the Death-and-Resurrection of Jesus. We become heirs of the Kingdom with Christ, "if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17).

This Sunday's passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans also links suffering with the yearning of the entire universe for fulfillment, a share in the glory (manifest presence) of God. This would be a surprise to those who had accepted the tenets of Greek philosophers and adherents of some ancient religions. Considering the material world in a totally negative light, they thought that death implied that the immortal soul escapes from the body as from a prison. "As the bird free of its cage seeks the heights, so the soul in death flies home to God." Such a reflection on a contemporary memorial card might also echo the same mentality. However, this probably expresses a sense of relief when death is seen to be a welcome release from debilitating illness. Christian hope for communion with God acknowledges that eternal life is complete only with the resurrection of the body. After all, soul and body collaborate in the good or evil deeds of this life, so the reward or punishment should affect both in union with God or in separation from the divine goal of human life.

The ancient Hebrews would have rejected the application of Aristotle's hylomorphic theory of the union of soul and body as two parts to human existence. The soul and body constitute a profound unity for Israelites, not merely the temporary juxtaposition of "form" and "matter," as Aristotle taught. The logic of reward for a lifetime of collaboration between soul and body is grounded on the mystery of each human person created in the divine image and likeness. The stamp of the divine permeates every aspect of our being and should not be seen as confined to the intellect and will. Beware of the human folly that grades the value of an unborn child or a handicapped person as less than that of a "perfect specimen" of humanity!

Jews and Christians recognize the important implications of the statement in the priestly creation hymn that God saw everything to be good (Gn 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The mystery of evil, suffering and death are linked to the abuse of human freedom (as noted in the discussion of Romans 5:12 on the twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time). The rest of creation yearns to see the human vocation fulfilled according to God's plan (Rom 8:19). Indeed, this revelation of how human beings accept intimacy with God is the basis for hope "that creation itself will be set free from slavery to corruption, to share in the glorious freedom of God's children" (8:21). This is the reality
of which visionaries and prophets dreamt.

We, in the ages lying
In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing
And Babel itself with our mirth;
And o'erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is, coming to birth.

(Arthur O'Shaughnessy, 1844-1881)

Progress toward peace through justice involves discipline and suffering; growth into the new creation will be accompanied by the outside threat of evil forces and birth pangs from within the community of faith. The first-fruits offered in the Temple constituted the best portion of the harvest dedicated to God as Creator and Provider. Possessing "the first-fruits of the Spirit" (8:23), the Church and its members benefit by the gift of the Holy Spirit through the risen Christ as the pledge that all peoples and, in some way, all creatures will be imbued with new life in the consummation of history. Our very sufferings and death constitute a share in Jesus' victory and a basis of hope for the world.