

OK, in honor of St. Patrick's Day.

Murphy went into a pub and said to the bartender, "I'd like a bottle of champagne. The bartender said, "What year?" Murphy said "I'd like it now!"

O'Shea got a letter from a creditor which said, "We're surprised that we haven't yet received payment of this account." O'Shea wrote back and said, "Well, you shouldn't be surprised, I didn't send it!"

Two women were chatting in the supermarket. "The doctor advised my husband to give up golf," said one. The other one said, 'Oh dear, is it his heart?' Her friend said, 'Not at all. The doctor was over at the golf club the other day and saw him playing!'

It's easy to get lost in today's gospel. There are 5 times when Jesus seems very puzzling. First, some Greeks come to see Jesus and His answer to them is to speak of His forthcoming death. How is that an answer? Scholars suggest that the connection is probably this: they want to learn from Him and understand Him, and they think they can do that only while He is alive, but they suspect that the religious leaders' plot to kill Him will succeed in the next few days, so they are desperate to get to Him before it's too late. His answer, in speaking of His death, is, in effect, that to understand Him they must look at His death, not just His life, because that's what He came into the world for. So Jesus prays aloud so that He can be heard by the Greek visitors as well as the Jews and His disciples: "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour."

The second puzzle is this: when Jesus speaks of His death, He uses the analogy of the grain of wheat giving itself up to the ground and only in this way fulfilling its destiny to be a living plant. He says this to teach them that only by death can we keep on living; that the human being was designed by God to die in 2 ways: first, to die to itself, to our own selfish egotism and thus come to life spiritually and for others; and second, that each of us also has to physically die in order to enter heaven and complete fulfillment. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched – or go bad."

Jesus explicitly interprets His analogy of the grain of wheat by saying that to love our life and insist on keeping it, to grasp it, to hold on to it, to refuse to give it away to others, is to lose it; and the only way to keep it, to preserve it, is to give it away, to lose it. The word He uses is 'hate,' but it does not mean the emotion of despising our life but the choice to give it up for the sake of others, to sacrifice our own wants for a greater good, to turn away from the temptation to idolize it and make our own life our god.

A third paradox is that Jesus speaks of His crucifixion as His GLORIFICATION. Crucifixion was the most grimly inglorious, painful, ugly and degrading invention in the long and terrible human history of torture. Yet after His resurrection, when Jesus appeared in His new, glorious, resurrected body, it still had its wounds from His crucifixion. Why? Because they were now part of His glory. They were like badges of honor, like purple hearts or congressional medals of honor.

Why are Christ's wounds glorious? Because they are wounds of love, and love is glorious.

A fourth paradox is that what seems to be the supreme triumph of the devil, whom Jesus calls 'the ruler of this world' (Jn 12:31) – namely, getting Jesus killed – is how Jesus says He will drive the devil out.

Jesus beat the devil by a kind of spiritual judo: using the enemy's own force against him. It works because it is the essential nature of evil to be self-destructive. That's why mass murderers usually also kill themselves.

The 5th paradox is what Jesus means when He says that He will draw everyone to Himself. He says that the way He will do this, the way He will win the world and attract us to Himself, the way He will make us fall in love with Him and imitate Him and want to be like Him, is by being 'lifted up from the earth.' But what He means by this is not being lifted up on a throne but by being lifted up on the cross. It's not the suffering that attracts us, but the love behind it, the love that gives its life over for our sake. (all adapted from Peter Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, Cycle B, p237-240)

OK, so what does this have to do with us? Part of the problem with religion is that we have often made it about having the right answers, right doctrine, even memorizing parts of the catechism. And while that's all well and good, it's often lacking the one thing necessary – love. I don't think the important thing in religion is to be certain about the answers nearly as much as being serious – and wrestling with – the questions. Life is complicated; life is messy, and life is never easy. Most people are struggling with the choice of the better of 2 goods or the lesser of 2 evils. The answers aren't always obvious, and we easily stumble and fall.

But when we hold the questions, struggle with them, and pray about them, we meet and reckon with our own contradictions, our own dilemmas, and we invariably arrive at a turning point where we either avoid God – or meet Him.

When we hang on the horns of the dilemma with Christ – between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human realms – it creates liminal space, what the Celtic tradition calls 'the thin places.' It is in this liminal space, this thin space, that heaven and earth meet – and where all transformation takes place. We don't learn love from catechism answers, we learn love from struggle, from challenge, from suffering. This is the paradox that marks the life of the Christian, and it is at the heart of our faith. We call it the Paschal Mystery, and it is at the heart of every celebration of the Eucharist. We sing "The mystery of faith" – and we respond "Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free." The transformation takes place through the cross of Christ, through suffering, through the place where heaven and earth meet still on Calvary's hill. (freely adapted from CENTER OF ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION email from Sunday, August 22, 2010, HOLDING THE TENSION: THE POWER OF PARADOX, Richard Rohr).

Third, a story to illustrate this truth of paradox and its power to transform us. In 1875, the same year that Antonin Dvorak finished his Fifth Symphony, he and his wife lost a child, Josefa, 2 days after her birth. Life seemed to conspire against him. He was not at the time the internationally successful composer he would eventually become. His family did not have money (his father had been a tavern keeper who had wanted his son to be a butcher), and Dvorak made a poor living as a church organist and music teacher.

The musician, husband, and father attempted to turn his grief about his daughter into music, writing a piano piece and planning a choral setting of the Stabat Mater, the Latin hymn about Mary at the foot of the cross, which we sing at Stations of the Cross. Other commitments distracted him from the piece, however. And then in 1877, within the space of a month, 2 tragedies disturbed his personal life. Dvorak lost a 3-year-old because of smallpox and another baby daughter died of accidental poisoning. His revived grief made him take up the Stabat Mater once more. He finished the work, considered among his greatest compositions, within 2 months.

The composition was wildly successful, gaining Dvorak much international attention. Because of the popularity of the piece in London, the composer was invited to conduct it in the Royal Albert Hall. There, for

an audience of 12,000, Dvorak conducted a chorus made up of 250 sopranos, 160 altos, 180 tenors, and 250 basses, supported by an orchestra with 92 string instruments. The performance was something of an establishing moment of his career. The night after the performance, Dvorak wrote, "From all, I have gained the conviction that a new, and with God's will, happier period is now beginning for me in England..."

Life had hurt the composer into some of the most beautiful music he would ever write. Then, as with Job after his troubles, Divine Providence sent Dvorak good fortune. By a strange alchemy, his genius had been able to change his leaden sorrow into the golden beauty of transcendent music. As in the case of a beautiful pearl, which is caused by the introduction of some irritating and alien stimulant in the oyster, the music does not reveal the suffering that helped cause it. Nevertheless, Dvorak's Stabat Mater shows how intimately related pain and redemptive beauty can be. In the wisdom of the classic work THE IMITATION OF CHRIST: "If you bear the cross gladly, it will bear you." Perhaps we cannot aspire to the genius of a Dvorak, but we can hope to reflect in our own way the famous saying of William Penn: "No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no cross, no crown." Such is the power of suffering-borne-in-faith-and-hope, such is the power of paradox, such is the power of faith lived out in the thin places. Amen. (last section adapted from MARKINGS, September 17, 2000, p 1-4)