

**Passion Sunday (Fifth Sunday of Lent)**  
**Jeremiah 31: 31-34, Hebrews 5: 5-10, John 12: 20-33**

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Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2006.

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May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Imagine.

Sitting alone on a perfect white pebbled beach in the clear warm spring sunshine of May.  
I sat there, feeling the warmth of the sun on my body, scooping up handfuls of beautiful, warm,  
smooth white pebbles,  
letting them run through my fingers;  
my toes in the water;  
the only sound, the gentle lapping  
of the water, shifting the pebbles to and fro;  
and not another soul in sight.

I remember this moment as clearly as if it were yesterday.

It was almost 2 years ago.

I felt at one with the world, Peace, perfect peace. Body, soul and mind.

A feeling of integration.

A feeling of wholeness.

That sense of deep inner peace

- most of the time so elusive.

At that moment I had a real and felt sense of the words "The peace of God which passes all  
understanding"

All was right with the world and

God was in His heaven!"<sup>a</sup>

Then, without warning, I felt a sudden surge of emotion.

And, to my surprise, I found myself saying:

"Thank you God, thank you, thank you"

and then

"I love you so much, thank you dad, thank you! . . ."

And THEN tears began to trickle down my cheeks,

Tears of deep joy and deep pain,

tears of happiness and of sorrow.

All intermingled.

William Blake wrote "Man was made joy and woe"

and he goes on

"Joy and woe, woven fine"

A clothing for the soul divine.

Under every grief and pine

Runs a joy with silken twine"<sup>b</sup>

"Why did you have to die for me to arrive at this point in my life?

And for me to experience this sense of well-being, peace and hope?

Did you REALLY die for ME? Why?

But I knew in the depths of my heart that

the "why" didn't really matter.

It was as it was.  
It had been given a gift, “a silken twine”,  
a new and felt sense of hope, the future;  
the possibility of a new path, a new life.  
That REALLY IS what it felt like!

I was in Greece, happily travelling around alone  
with just a rucksack.  
This was how I had spent the last couple of weeks  
of my sabbatical from the City.  
WONDERFUL!

Well, yes it was, BUT . . . . .  
What had preceded this 3-month break  
was the unexpected death of my father,  
my father who I loved very much.

YES, only months earlier,  
THIS unexpected event  
had plunged me into the depths of despair and confusion.  
Fragmentation, brokenness, disturbance,  
piercing pain, dull sorrow,  
uncontrollable emotion.  
Emotion and feelings were normally well and truly buried beneath the black suit in the City!  
Being in control was imperative for survival!

All was NOT right with the world  
and God was NOT in His heaven –  
In fact He was nowhere, or so it felt to me.

In his book *Reaching out*, Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and psychologist,  
talks about the INTERRUPTIONS to our lives.  
Interruptions over which we have no control:  
Loss, death, sickness.  
He asks if these interruptions are opportunities. Challenges provoking an inner response through  
which growth takes place.  
Challenges through which we move towards  
the fullness of being (wholeness, completeness).

Are the events of our life moulding us, as a sculptor moulds his clay?  
If we are obedient to these careful moulding hands, can we discover our real vocations and reach  
maturity and fulfilment?

Nouwen asks if these unexpected interruptions are actually invitations to give up things.  
To change in order to open up new unexplored areas of experience.  
These unwelcomed interruptions might be opportunities to step out of ourselves, opportunities to  
serve others and God.

Today, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Passion Sunday,  
is the Sunday when our lectionary and liturgy  
help to point us towards the Cross.  
Towards the agony and suffering  
which Christ endured on that journey to his death.  
Towards the agony and suffering of his crucifixion.

In our readings, we see Jesus faced with the reality of the task ahead of him.  
His realisation that “his hour has come”.

His “soul is troubled” and he knows the pain he must bear.  
“He offered up prayers and supplications to His Father with loud cries and tears”.

In taking on our humanity, Jesus was not spared suffering and pain.  
He, as we, was subject to weakness.  
Our great high priest was, in every respect, tried and tested, battered and bruised, just as we are.

And did Jesus hide his humanity?  
Did he hide his emotions?  
No!  
They were real and intense:  
not a silent tear, but groans of anguish;  
not a twinge of pity, but heartbroken compassion;  
not a passing irritation, but terrifying anger;  
not a weak smile, but ecstatic celebration.

We are all so used to trying to hide  
our flaws and our humanity.  
Our emotions.

We strive for what we see as perfection  
(by which I mean faultlessness).  
This is what we believe we see in everyone else,  
with our rose-tinted spectacles firmly in place.  
It’s a costly exercise at the best of times.  
Wasted energy and emotion.  
Self-inflicted pressure, trying to please others.  
Trying to be what THEY want.  
And all the time, we’re burying and destroying our real **selves**.

God, as the Psalmist says, “knit us together in our mother’s womb”.  
HE created those “**selves**” in his own image.  
He WANTS us to be our true selves.  
We were and are created in HIS image:  
Created in the image of God.

I don’t know how many of you have come across the phrase “the wounded healer”.

This is the title of another book by Henri Nouwen.

The phrase is used of Jesus and can be used of each and every one of us.

In it he talks about the ailments of the human spirit: anxiety, rootlessness, loneliness, fear and despair.

For Nouwen, the person who heals these ailments,  
is the one who is able to look honestly  
at their own woundedness,  
their own confusion and sense of mortality.

The true healer, the wounded healer,  
acknowledges their own powerlessness  
alongside the powerlessness of Jesus at Gethsemane and Calvary.

In that intersection of powerlessness,  
the wounded healer finds the strength to live by the Gospel hope rather than trying to go it alone.  
Such a healer does not have all the answers.

How difficult it is to identify  
with someone who thinks they do have all the answers!  
It's unreal.  
And what can they give or offer to others when they are so far removed  
from the reality of the human condition.

The wounded healer is one who faces their own vulnerability,  
recognizes own their weakness, their own woundedness

It is in that place of authenticity they find the strength to stand with others as part of the human  
family.

Like Jesus, like the disciples,  
we come together in our brokenness before God  
and God uses this brokenness.

But pain and suffering form just one aspect of our humanity.

Pain and suffering form just one aspect of today's readings.

"Jesus through suffering learned obedience and was made perfect".

As we look towards Holy Week and Good Friday, we also look towards the Resurrection.

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified".

Glorification means both Crucifixion AND Resurrection. Death AND life.

The two are inextricably linked.

"For a grain of wheat to bring forth fruit it must fall into the earth and die"

Pain and joy, sadness and happiness,  
dark and light, death and life,  
Crucifixion and Resurrection  
– complementary antonyms – opposites –  
it is difficult to define one without the other.

Over Lent, we've had lots of beautiful, sorrowful, plaintive music in Minor keys.  
Beautiful sad music.  
And we may well have been moved by the beauty of it all, moved to tears at times.  
But were they tears of joy or sadness?

True perfection or wholeness,  
true completion  
is only achieved through that very delicate balance of positives and negatives.  
Together they make the whole.

"In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning"<sup>c</sup>

Natalie Sleeth, the American hymnwriter wrote:

In our end is our beginning;  
In our time, infinity,  
in our doubt there is believing;  
in our life, eternity.

In our death, a resurrection;  
at the last, a victory.  
unrevealed until its season,  
Something God alone can see.<sup>d</sup>

Pottery, as many of you know, is one of my passions.  
I want to finish with the last two verses of one of my favourite poems

The Master Potter gently took each piece,  
and built again a vessel as he chose.  
Its shape was softer than before – its tracing fine,  
he breathed his healing love to seal each join;  
it was a patient work, he did not rush  
to force the fractured remnants into place,  
but held each one until the pain had ebbed,  
then quietly joined them in his new design.

I felt the newness of the Maker's touch  
and saw with wonder how he brought again  
a treasure, fashioned to his glorious plan;  
a new creation, out of brokenness.  
He held it now with pleasure in his eyes,  
yes, and with love and set it in its place.  
You have come through the fire, my little one,  
you have been ravaged – now you're made anew,  
rejoice to me my child born out of love,  
and know that I was broken once – for you<sup>e</sup>.

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<sup>a</sup> Robert Browning - Pippa's Song - from Pippa Passes

<sup>b</sup> William Blake – Auguries of Innocence

<sup>c</sup> TS Eliot – East Coker

<sup>d</sup> Natalie Sleeth - Hymn of Promise

<sup>e</sup> Sue Wharton - Broken