

*“Did e’re such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown.”*

... the words of Isaac Watts.

The cross is the place where infinite love and agonising suffering meet, for the benefit of all mankind.

It is not an easy place to be, to watch and pray at the foot of the cross, as we do today.

There are those who sit at the foot of the cross and see a fellow human being suffering horribly and undeservedly. They see Jesus suffering for the consequences of *their* sin. They see themselves as no longer needing to suffer so, because Jesus has suffered for them. By his death he destroyed death, and we too can rise above our own death, through faith in him.

There are those who sit at the foot of the cross and see perfect love on display; that perfect love which, Good-Shepherd style, will stop at nothing to reach us all; that perfect love which lays down their own life for those entrusted to their care; that perfect love which does not leave mankind helpless, alone and rejected in our sin, but which opens wide arms to embrace us all into God’s Kingdom, through all-conquering love.

There are those who sit at the foot of the cross and feel the overwhelming heaviness of grief. Grief for the death of one they love; grief for the apparent futility and finality of the event; grief that such a **good** life should so cruelly be brought this low, debased and degraded for all to see.

The cross is the place where infinite love and agonising suffering meet, for the benefit of all mankind.

Suffering and **love** evoke in us all **the deepest of responses** when we meet them in **our** day to day lives.

We respond to acute suffering and to tremendous love almost **viscerally** and **instinctively**, with almost our **whole being**. They break down our reserve; our polite editing of our responses disappears under the intensity of our emotion. In such moments what you glimpse is our raw-selves, our real-selves revealed from behind the masks we normally wear. It often takes acute suffering or tremendous love to reveal our **real, raw** selves.

It is in *such* raw moments that we can grow in faith.

I want to read some words from a book called *The Naked Now* by an American Franciscan writer called Richard Rohr. He writes that:

*“Those who discover the deeper meaning of faith are almost without exception “those who have suffered much or loved deeply... Only love and suffering are strong enough to break down our usual ego defences... and open us up to mystery”. **They** are the primary spiritual teachers.”*

*“Love is what we **long** for and **were created** for – in fact love is what we **are** as an outpouring of God – but suffering often seems to be our opening to that **need**, that **desire**, and that **identity**”.*

*“Suffering... **can** make you very bitter and close you down, **or** it can make you wise, compassionate and utterly open... It often takes you to the edge of your inner resources where you “fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10v31), even against your will”.*

*“Great love has the potential to open the **heart** space and then the **mind** space. Great suffering has the potential to open the **mind** space, and then the **heart** space. Eventually, both spaces need to be opened...” **if** we are to grow in faith.*

When we are confronted by great love, when we are confronted by great suffering, it is in such moments that we can grow in faith, **because we are reacting with all our defences down, acting as our raw-selves**; in Rohr’s terminology, our heart space and our mind space are open to receive God.

It is rare that we willingly lay bare both our intellect and our emotions.

What Rohr is saying is that tremendous love allows us first to feel (our heart-space) and then to reflect and rationalise (our head-space) in order to receive God’s love with all our being.

And, great suffering prompts us to ask the question why (in our head-space); and then to allow our emotional response (our heart-space) to follow in grief, in frustration, in anger, in compassion. It is then that our whole being can respond to God.

It is in such moments that we can grow in faith, because it is in such moments that we are most open to God. The barriers are down. Our raw-self is revealed. We **hide nothing** from God and **his response** is to **love** us and to **affirm** us all the more.

The cross is the place where infinite love and agonising suffering meet, for the benefit of all mankind.

So there is probably no more conducive place to growing our faith than spending time at the foot of the cross, with all our barriers down, with our raw-selves on display as we try to appreciate the extremes of love and suffering **which were for us**, for our benefit, for establishing **our union** with God forevermore.

It is in such moments that *we cannot help **but*** grow in faith through our complete openness to God.

May that be true for us all as we pray at the foot of the cross today.

*“Did e’re such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown.”*