

THE MARTYR



Mark 15:15 "So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd . . . after flogging Jesus, handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed (Jesus) in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they placed it on (his head). And they began saluting him (saying), 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and (mockingly) knelt down in homage to him. After taunting him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. (And)

Then they led (Jesus) out (of the governor's headquarters) to crucify him."

This is the fourth sermon in a five-part series which I have been preaching this Lent entitled 'Archetypes of the Spiritual Journey.' As I noted at the very beginning, Jesus once told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God was not coming with things that can be observed, but that the Kingdom of God is actually within us (Lk. 17.21). Lent is the traditional season of the church year to spend some time reflecting upon our interior lives, but as previously observed, most of us don't really know *how* to talk about our spiritual selves. This sermon series is an attempt to provide some images and language to aid us in our spiritual journeys, and in our reflections upon them.

Four weeks ago, we began with acknowledging the Innocent one within each of us, who childlike longs for some kind of lost Paradise, who yearns for a place where there is peace on earth and goodwill among humankind, where we will be safe and loved and accepted as we are. The Orphan within each one of us, however, is shocked to discover how difficult real life is, and how life is not fair, and how powerless we really are to change it. The Orphan within each of us thus longs for a Savior, for

someone or something to come and rescue us, and make things right. The Wanderer within each one of us flees from our present suffering, asserting that we don't have to live this way, and then goes searching for a better life and a better world somewhere, often finding 'our true selves' along the way. The Warrior within each one of us struggles to stand up then for who we are and what we believe in, especially in the face of opposition and danger, while the Martyr within each one of us sees the pain of our present lives and just accepts it as the cost of caring for others, accepts the suffering as redemptive.

Now in our secular world, life is often seen as a battle. And men are most often seen and most often see themselves as the Warriors in that battle. Sadly, women are most often cast or see themselves in the role of victims in that battle, as Martyrs, wives sacrificing for their husbands, or mothers for their children, or just being the weaker sex.

In the religious life, the preeminent archetype *is* in fact the Martyr. The very word "martyr" comes from Greek meaning "witness," and was applied to early saints who stood up for their faith, even if it cost them their lives. So, like the Warrior, the Martyr within each of us witnesses to who we are and what we believe in, but the Martyr is also willing and able

to lose the fight for the sake of our community. The Martyr is the Christ figure who willingly sacrifices him or herself for the benefit of all.

And in some way, each one of us willingly or unwillingly gives of ourselves at times, we forego a part of who we are or what we want, for the benefit of others, for the good of the community. We choose to do something often not so much because we want to, but because we believe it will be good for others, or because we believe it to be the 'right thing' to do. Ultimately, the Martyr within each of us is our capacity to give of ourselves for another; ultimately the Martyr within each of us is our capacity to love. Yet as previously noted, we cannot really give of ourselves, we cannot really be intimate in our loving, if we do not have a strong sense of self to give.

Thus, sometimes we attempt to exercise our Martyr role prematurely, before we have adequately explored the Wanderer or the Warrior within each one of us, before we have 'found ourselves' or have learned to stand up and fight for what we believe in. The result of premature Martyrdom is usually a sense of bitterness, or a feeling of manipulation, or just a general sense of guilt and dis-ease. In such cases we usually expect something back in return for our sacrifices, and we are often

disappointed when we do not get what we imagined for our efforts. Children, for instance, often seek their parents' love and approval by sacrificing something of who they are, in order to fulfill the expectations of others, we all do it at times, often only then to later rebel and to set off to actually 'find themselves' again. A wife may sacrifice herself continually, hoping to win the approval and love of her husband or her children, yet finds instead only that she is taken increasingly for granted. An employee may give up his weekends and evenings to the company without any reward or recognition from his boss. And all of us may struggle to be really "good" at times, to do the 'right' thing, hoping to win God's favor, assuming that if we do so then God will spare us the trials and tribulations we see in other people's lives. In each of these cases, the actions are indeed sacrificial, the form is right, but the goal here is not the Martyr's, for the goal here is really the same as the Orphan's --- to find a way to be saved, to escape the hardship and suffering of life, and to win love and approval from others.

But sacrifice need not always be a way to manipulate God or other people into giving us what we want; we can also give freely as an expression of ourselves, as an expression of who we really are, without any expectation of return. At this

higher level, the more mature Martyr is not trying to bargain to save oneself, but believes that the sacrifice of self to save others is just who they are and what they want for themselves. This is the dominant spiritual lesson that most religions have been teaching for thousands of years, and it is the essence of Christianity and Judaism, to do unto others as you would want others to do unto you.

The true Martyr is thus someone who endures life's trials and tribulations, endures our hardships and pain, but maintains their love of life without bitterness, maintains a strong sense of self, and the capacity to care for others as an expression of that self. No matter how much suffering the true Martyr experiences, they do not complain and try to 'pass it along' to others. They willingly absorb the pain and sorrow of life as simply a part of our experience, declaring that the "suffering stops here." True Martyrs do not evoke a sense of guilt or resentment from those around them, but a sense of authentic love and self.

How can we tell whether we are giving of ourselves appropriately or not? Well, when we are, doing so feels compatible with our identity, it feels as an outgrowth of who we are, we are just being ourselves. And in the end, we reveal who

we really are by what we are willing to sacrifice for. Think of Mother Teresa, the little nun who worked with the homeless and dying not because it was a sacrifice, not for renown or recognition, but because that was who she was, that was how she instinctively responded to the needs of the poor around her in the slums and gutters of Calcutta. The same can be said for the lives of St. Francis of Assisi or St. Elizabeth of Hungary, for the patience and long-suffering of Martin Luther King, Jr. and for the eternal hope of the imprisoned Nelson Mandela. For many of us, making decisions and commitments about when and how much we are willing to sacrifice helps us to learn and reveal who we really are, to ourselves as well as to others. In this way, the Martyr within each one of us contributes in our search for our true self and our personal salvation, by identifying what we are willing to sacrificing for, and thus who we really are.

But even here we may be destructive of others in our giving, for there is a fine line between giving and an unhealthy supporting of someone else's dependency, or irresponsibility. Sometimes we persist in giving to people who use our gifts and energy only to help themselves to continue in some destructive behavior. This pattern is demonstrated most clearly by the symbiotic relationship between the nurse and the alcoholic, or

the addict and the enabler, in which one person seems totally selfless, supporting and caring for the other, but is actually making it possible for the other to persist in a deadly habit or self-destructive action, making the other person weaker as a result of our sacrifice, not stronger, as should happen in truly loving relationships.

An easy litmus test can determine whether we are giving sacrificially or enabling a dependent behavior. If, when we give, we feel either used or smugly superior, then it is time to re-examine what really is going on in our giving. Healthy giving is respectful of both the giver and the receiver, and healthy giving recognizes that there is a giving and receiving in all loving actions, that there is a reciprocity in sacrifice --- whereas sacrifice has too often been misinterpreted as loving your neighbor *instead* of yourself! If as Martyrs we think giving is more virtuous than receiving, we are likely to be giving inappropriately, and also, we are likely to be denying the gifts that we do receive from others, leaving us often feeling shortchanged.

Appropriate sacrifice gives the Martyrs within each one of us a deeper knowledge of our values and our commitment to others, and hence allows us to be more ourselves, not less.

Conversely, inappropriate sacrifice makes us lose touch with ourselves and with our capacity for intimacy, or love, or the joy of connection, and thus makes those we love weaker and more dependent upon us. The beginning of wisdom is being able to distinguish between transformative sacrifice and mere suffering, caused because we are too cowardly or too unimaginative to think of a more joyous way to live.

The more freely and fearlessly the Martyr within each one of us can give, the less it feels like sacrifice, and the more it feels simply like an expression of who we are. Our capacity to receive life fully is psychologically related to our willingness to sacrifice what life requires of us. --- We choose, for instance, to love as fully as we can, even though we know that doing so opens us up to so much pain and sorrow. We choose to work, we find a profession, even though we know that we risk failure, or receiving little or no appreciation for our labors, simply because it is what we want to do, it is who we are. We choose to live life to the fullest, knowing that we eventually will have to die, and part with all that we have loved in life. --- For we realize that those who cling to their lives will lose them, while those who lose their lives easily for another's sake will gain them. Such paradoxes are the very

mystery and magic of life. And thus, next week we shall look at
the Magician within each one of us. AMEN