

# Rolheiser: An honest prayer

Recently I received a letter from a woman whose life, in effect, had imploded. Within the course of a few months, her husband divorced her, she lost her job, was forced to move from the house she had lived in for many years, was locked down in her new place by Covid restrictions, and was diagnosed with a cancer which might be untreatable. It was all too much.

At a point, she broke down in anger and resignation. She turned to Jesus and with bitterness, said: *If you're there, and I doubt it, what do you know about any of this? You were never this alone!* I suspect that we all have moments like this. What did Jesus know of any of this?

Well, if we can believe the Gospels, Jesus did know all of this, not because he had a divine consciousness, but because like the woman in the story he knew right from the beginning what it meant to be the one standing alone, outside the normal human circle.

This is evident right from his birth.

The Gospels tell us that Mary was forced to give birth to Jesus in a stable because there was no room for them at the inn. That heartless innkeeper! The poor man has had to endure centuries of censure.

However, that thought misses the point of the story and misconstrues its meaning. The moral of this story is not that some heartless cruelty took place or that the world was too preoccupied with itself to take notice of Jesus' birth, though this latter implication is true. Rather the real point is that Jesus, the Christ, was born an outsider, as one of the poor, as someone who, right from the beginning, was not given a place in the mainstream.

As Gil Bailie puts it, Jesus was *unanimity-minus-one*. How could it be otherwise?

Given who Jesus was, given that his central message was good news for the poor, and given that he entered into human life precisely to experience all it contains, including its pains and humiliations, he could hardly have been born in a palace, enjoyed every kind of support, and been the center of love and attention. To be in real solidarity with the poor, as Merton once put it, he had to be born "outside the city"; and whether that was the case historically or not, it is a rich, far-reaching metaphor.

Right from the beginning, Jesus knew both the pain and the shame of one who is excluded, who has no place in the mainstream.

When we look closely at the Gospels, we see that there was no human pain, emotional or physical, from which Jesus was spared. It is safe to say, I

submit, that no one, irrespective of his or her pain, can say to Jesus: *You didn't have to undergo what I had to undergo!* He underwent it all.

During his ministry, he faced constant rejection, ridicule, and threat, sometimes having to hide away like a criminal on the run. He was also a celibate, one who slept alone, one deprived of normal human intimacy, one with no family of his own. Then in his passion and death, he experienced the extremes of both emotional and physical pain. Emotionally, he literally "sweated blood", and physically, in his crucifixion, he endured the most extreme and humiliating pain possible for a human being to undergo.

As we know, crucifixion was designed by the Romans with more than only capital punishment in mind. It was designed as well to inflict the maximum amount of pain and humiliation possible for a person to endure. That was one of the reasons they sometimes gave morphine to the one being crucified, not to ease his pain, but to keep him from passing out and escaping the pain.

Crucifixion was also designed to utterly humiliate the one being put to death. Hence, they stripped the person naked, so that his genitals were exposed and that in his dying convulsions the loosening of his bowels would be his final shame. As well, some scholars speculate that during the night leading up his death on Good Friday, he may also have been sexually abused by the soldiers. Truly there was not a pain or humiliation he did not endure.

An old, classic definition of prayer tells us this: *Prayer is lifting mind and heart to God.*

Well, there will be low points in our lives when our circumstances will force us to lift our minds and hearts to God in a way that seems antithetical to prayer.

Sometimes we will be brought to a breaking point where in brokenness, anger, shame, and in the despairing thought that nobody, including God, cares and that we are all alone in this, consciously or otherwise, we will confront Jesus with the words: *And what do you know about that!*

And Jesus will hear those words as a prayer, as a sincere sigh of the heart, rather than as some kind of irreverence.