

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS



First Station

The innocent Jesus is condemned.

When we see Jesus condemned, we find him drawing very close to us in our own experiences of being accused. He does not defend himself and in this he calls us to hear his voice in those times that we are not to defend ourselves. His innocence did not make him defend himself, so we understand that silence does not mean guilt; it may simply be a response of trust for our loving Father in heaven at those times when self-defense is not the way of peace. Of course, in our own case, we have often sinned; even when we have not, we may be aware of the impurity of heart that makes us always subject to some guilt; this is part of our anguish.

But Jesus says to us, “Trust the Father in heaven. He is full of mercy when you are guilty; he asks your patience when you are innocent. Either way, trust him, under accusation.”

Second station.

Jesus takes up his cross.

That is what we must do -- accept the sufferings of our present situation, whatever they are, knowing that Jesus is with us in them, for in all our sufferings, Jesus draws very near to us. Our experience of his nearness, however, depends in part on our trust, our remembrance of his close union with those who suffer. We must not think he is only in heaven, or “far away”. He was born to be Emmanuel, “God with us”.

Third Station

Jesus falls the first time.

Sometimes our sufferings seem too great to bear, and we falter. Jesus understands that too, but we must never give in and say, “Well, now I have fallen, so I know the burden was too great.” No, we must get up and go on. Jesus is with us. He got up from the dusty road to purchase for us the courage we need in this situation. When we say he earned our salvation, we don’t refer to a legal arrangement between him and his Father, but to the power to live life fully, which he shares with us under every circumstance whatsoever.

Fourth Station

Jesus meets his holy mother, our mother too.

Not only is Jesus with us in our tribulations, so is his mother. Mary does not accuse us, and she is never absent; she is present with us in our suffering, full of love and encouragement.

What mother's heart does not urge her to help in every possible way when her children are troubled? But it is not always God's will that mothers do more than offer their presence; the child must learn to walk on his own, so sometimes Mary is no more than with us.

Her presence is a second warmth for our spirits. Jesus gives us his mother from the Cross, but the gift extends to all our times of trial, not just the final one or special ones. Now – and at the hour of our death.

Fifth Station

Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his Cross.

Here, what a reversal! When Jesus carried his cross and it was too heavy, Simon, rather a nobody, was called on to help him. Now, we are the nobodies carrying crosses, and it is Jesus who helps us!

But also, more traditionally, we are promised in this station that if indeed the cross is too heavy to bear, our Father will make sure that someone comes along to help us, maybe not so willingly at first! Not to fear.

Notice how, in the end, Simon the Nobody became Simon Somebody because he learned to love Jesus. We find, in the Acts of the Apostles, that his son Rufus is a Christian. We will learn to love Jesus more when we share our crosses with him through trust and when we learn to receive gratefully those whom he sends to us in our need.

Of course also, we too will have our times of being Simon -- Jesus will send us to help others with their troubles. We must go!

Sixth Station

Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

Tradition says that, in response to this act of courageous mercy, Jesus imprinted his face upon her veil. However that may have been, (some say there is a confusion between this tradition and the existence of the “vera icon” the “true image” on the Shroud of Turin or the Veil of Mon-appello) we do know that God asks us to show mercy to others, and this is indeed exactly how his face becomes imprinted on our hearts. This imprint is his work within us, when we act in mercy. And people do see it.

Seventh Station

Jesus falls the second time.

The message here, is as before: get up and go on, even though it seems, for a moment, entirely too difficult. It is a word we need to hear more than once when our crosses are heavy. Jesus understands this.

He asks us not to give up, not to conclude that since it is so hard, we can lie down and

quit. No, get up and go on, go on; Jesus himself is with us in our discouragement and pain.

Eighth Station

Jesus meets the holy women of Jerusalem...

They are weeping for him, whereas if they understood the truth, they would weep for the sins of Jerusalem; and if they knew the plain fact of what was coming, they would weep for the unspeakable sorrows to come as a result of those sins. Forty years later, the hills were covered with the children of Jewry on crosses; the Temple was leveled and the entire nation was destroyed. Jesus saw this, and from the Roman perspective, it was because the leaders of the Jews thirsted for political power instead of being content with their spiritual mission. Had they followed Jesus and left political power with the Romans, how differently things might have come about!

Through the years, these holy women have been imitated by many others who weep for a sentimental love, but not for sin. Jesus does receive even such simple love, but he would do more for us if our hearts were fully given to his kingdom. How often we trouble ourselves about entirely the wrong things!

Ninth station

Jesus falls the third time.

It's all uphill at the end, and it truly seems impossible, but it is not. In this fall, Jesus draws near to us in our deepest discouragement, not merely in our passing anxiety. This third fall is the one that stretches out into the boundless distance. It is the one that covers our most hopeless falls, those perhaps due to past sins or things that make our cross seem total folly. "This is not a cross", the spirit of darkness says to us, "but is only the plain result of your sins, and you are going to be destroyed by them because they are too great to be forgiven."

No, however difficult, and whatever the reasons which are presently beyond our comprehension, our sufferings are our present vocation, and as we rise, choosing immortal hope over present discouragement, Jesus is with us.

Tenth Station

Jesus is stripped of his garments.

This station is the answer to all shame. Jesus is shamed and in pain, and he takes our hands, even our hearts, as we are shamed, and he holds them in silence. Though he could not sin, Jesus has found, in his humanity, a way to draw near to us in the crushing experience of shame. And whether our shame is a result of sin or the result of socially rejected virtue, Jesus still draws near. It is not his will that we should be crushed; it is not even his will that we should bear any sorrow alone.

Eleventh Station

Jesus is nailed to the cross.

In this station, Jesus yields silently and, in a real sense, willingly, because forgivingly, to the soldiers who nail him. Many times we accept sufferings because we see no way out, but we want to make sure we can tell someone that it isn't fair. It is here that Jesus speaks to us of this matter. He is with us and asks us to be with him, to be truly patient, truly sacrificial, to die for those who need life.

Who needs life? It is the tormentors who have no life; we who know Jesus are full of joy, even in those dark times when sadness sweeps across the face of our lives. Even then, in our deepest pain, our spiritual joy is a swift undercurrent, pulling our lives along towards Jesus although we seem unable to breathe, let alone follow. When we look up at those who are thoughtless and have not seen the beauty of Jesus, can we really envy them just because of their material comforts and wealth? Would we really trade our darkest and slowest hours of unanswered love for the plushy comfort of a cold heart?

Jesus is with us to answer this one.

Twelfth Station

Jesus dies on the Cross.

All the "last words" of Jesus are here, his thirst, his abandonment, his gift of his mother -- and above all, his forgiveness. It is a convincing forgiveness, because it comes from the midst of suffering. It is not the apparent forgiveness of apathy, such as one might find on a secular "easter," when all is well anyway, so why hold a grudge? No, it is far deeper, because Jesus forgives from the midst of the fire of his suffering. He wants us to know that he means it!

Also, Jesus is giving us a hint: Forgive quickly! Forgive in the midst of the pain if you want to see the real power of forgiveness. And if you want to see how Jesus forgives us "while we are in our sins" try forgiving someone else "while he is in the act of wounding you."

Joy!

One more thing: while Jesus is on the Cross, an agony of asphyxiation that should entirely suffice to occupy the mind of any human person, behold how he cares for those around him, as if it were Tuesday morning by the Lake. First he must minister to the repentant thief, then to his mother in need of care. Then, he must speak to those bored soldiers, particularly Longinus who is ready for conversion: "I thirst! I thirst for your conversion." And then they must look upon the One Whom they will pierce and hear him reject their narcotic in favor of prayer.

Thirteenth Station

Jesus is taken down from the Cross.

Here, the focus shifts entirely back to Mary our mother. Jesus' sufferings are complete, but what about her? This is the woman who was promised by the Angel Gabriel that her son would be Somebody Special. Is this not what all mothers desire? This is the woman who would have loved this firstborn son of hers, Jesus, with her whole heart -- even if he hadn't been the Son of God. Where are all those promises now? Her Holy Saturday is something for us to "ponder in the heart".

Here God speaks to us of those times when we feel that he has broken his promise to us -- has not given us life, has not brought us joy, has left us to be made fools of for trusting him. But Mary does not complain or lose faith; she simply does the next thing that needs to be done. The sacred Body must be taken down and prepared for burial lest it be thrown to the dogs. Joseph (of Arimathea, not her husband) is there to help; so is John of course.

Fourteenth Station

Jesus is laid in the tomb.

And everyone goes home. Now it is all over. Nothing to do but wait upon the will of God. Again, we are with Mary, more than with Jesus. With her, we do not know what is going on with Jesus, with the Father. All is silent; life continues, the Passover must be "celebrated" as if nothing had happened.

What is more lonely than the last requirement to go on as if nothing had happened when our hearts have been broken with grief? But we are not alone, because the motherhood of Mary, Jesus' last gift, is our stay in these silent sufferings.

The psychologist would have us talking, talking, talking, until we have become strangers to ourselves, to our own private hearts, always living in the half-published world of his highly-paid but spiritless "secular priesthood". Jesus has given us these stations to be with us in our humanity and keep it spiritual when it is sorrowful. In this way, he leads us to the "peace that passes understanding".

Paul writes that if we die with the Lord, we will live with the Lord. This is really true, because the sufferings we share with Jesus lead to life, but the sufferings we keep from him lead to death.

Strangely enough, considering the absolute holiness of God, it really does not matter so much whether our sufferings are the result of our personal sins or the result of our occasional virtue and our relationship with Jesus. What matters is whether, when suffering comes, we share it with Jesus or keep it to ourselves. It is in the Passion, represented by the stations, that Jesus offers to draw near to those depths of our hearts which open only in suffering; but we must invite his presence; we must share our hearts willingly. Jesus is ever the gentleman; he can be everywhere, but he does not "share" an interior experience that is not freely opened to him.

And so the Stations end, not with the Resurrection, but with this question: Do you re-

member his promises? Do you still believe in him? Because this is where our sufferings leave us when their intensity has abated enough to let us pray, but before the springtime of our joy. They leave us with Mary, going about the business of daily life and pondering in our hearts all that we have known of divine promises, of angels, and of the Lord himself.

But when the Son of Man returns, will he find any faith on earth?