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## The struggle inherent in believing

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Spiritual Reflections

Doesn't it seem bittersweet that even though we are in the midst of our annual celebration of Easter and all the joys we have in Jesus, the sacred texts call our attention to the suffering that is our lot as believers?



In the first reading from Acts, Luke narrates the experience of Peter and company. Forced to appear before the Sanhedrin and warned of the dire consequences that would befall them, the disciples continued to Acts 5:17-32, 40-41. They were emboldened by the Spirit and bursting with enthusiasm arising in hearts still alive with the surprise of the Resurrection, and dared to testify to the good news before their persecutors. In verses omitted from today's first reading, Luke tells of the flogging the disciples received for their efforts. Not only were they undaunted by that experience, they were actually strengthened by sharing in the sufferings of Jesus; and they went forth to continue their work in earnest.

A theme of glory tempered by suffering also pervades the second reading from Revelation. John the Seer's vision here offers a glimpse of eternity, where there is great rejoicing at the victory won by Jesus over sin and death -- yet at the very center of the celebration is a slain Lamb. Even the Gospel for today is

tinged with a note of sorrow that seems unwelcome in this season. Despite his emphasis on the love and forgiveness of the risen Jesus, the fourth evangelist offers a somber reminder that Peter, and all who love and feed Jesus' sheep, will know the struggle that is inherent in believing.

If this notion of accomplishing God's purposes by embracing suffering is disconcerting to contemporary believers, it was no less so for those of Jesus' day. Nevertheless, this idea was woven inextricably into the very fabric of the faith tradition they inherited from Israel. Recall the Isaian servant we encountered frequently in the scriptures of Lent and whose experience has now penetrated our Easter joy. This special servant, as Nicholas T. Wright has explained, attested to the understanding that suffering was somehow held within the ongoing divine purpose. In due time, present woe would yield to vindication, and present suffering would somehow hasten the moment when Israel's (humankind's) tribulation would be redeemed -- and, paradoxically, would be part of the means by which that redemption would be effected (The Challenge of Jesus, InterVarsity Press, 1999).

For all these reasons, the cross offers itself as the great linchpin of history; it was, as Wright has further noted, the moment when all evil and all pain came together in one place, in one person. There, in all its contradiction, the cross can be understood as Jesus' final great act of love. In the cross are drawn to a passionate climax all the loving words and works of his ministry: his touching of a leper; his tender mercies for the sick, the bereaved, the outcast, the poor; his tears at Lazarus' death. In all these, we see the profoundly human as well as God-filled Jesus; in him meet death and life, suffering and glory, struggle and hope.

The shadow of the cross looms large at every celebration of salvation, however joyous. We who have committed ourselves to him have claimed as our own a crucified Savior. His suffering, his cross, is the surest and clearest window through which we may perceive the heart and character of God. Consequently, the more we learn about these two sides of our faith -- the struggle and the believing, the suffering and the glory -- the more we learn about the One in whose image we are created and recreated; the more we learn about our own vocation to be what Wright calls "cross-bearing people," the people in whose lives and through whose service God is made known. As representatives or images of God in the world, it is our redemptive task to bring the achievement of the cross to bear on the world.

Of course we rejoice in the glory of Easter, of new life and of salvation, but we never forget or fail to acknowledge that all these blessings have come to us filtered through the prism of the cross. Does this make our celebrating bittersweet? Perhaps, but even the bread of the Word and the bread of the Lord that we have gathered to share today must first be broken and poured out before they may be shared. Let us be grateful to God, for we celebrate a broken Christ who makes us whole; we remember a poured-out Christ who heals our wounds; we rejoice in a dying Christ who gives us life. This is both the privilege and the paradox, the bitterness and the blessedness of our believing.

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