



The Grace of Suffering

Our condition with the Lord is that we are tormented and the Lord is always healing. It is not for us to wonder why we are in pain, why we exist in suffering. Divine revelation does not answer this question. It does not say why we are subjected to suffering, suffering of the body, suffering of the spirit, suffering of the conscience. The Holy Scriptures are content to take notice of this and to start out on this basis to reveal to us how we can escape from this suffering or how we can bear it and transform it into a creative force, a means of drawing near to God, so that we can make it into a ladder by which we climb up to heaven.

In the Bible, we have promises of healing and salvation from sin. We have a promise of joy and a revelation of eternal life that comes when we accept God's mystery and obey Him in all the misfortunes that we taste in the world, whether in the spirit or the body. When we are in such a condition, like the torment of the ten lepers that the Gospel mentions to us today, we should say "Lord have mercy".

Here we observe that the men sought mercy from Christ, which is more comprehensive than just healing. When we ask for healing, most of us ask for healing of the body, and this is good. Physical suffering throws us into a vague state, as though we were alone on a mountaintop, where the freshness of the air makes breathing difficult and arduous. In the physical weakness of our members, all our questions fall away. All the knowledge and understanding that we have stored away ceases. It passes away and becomes nothing. And so we hold on, in emptiness, impotence and poverty. Suddenly, we are seized by the insignificance of everything that hinders us from striving toward our purpose. Weakness and sickness wipe away everything superficial in us. We are inwardly purified when we are baptized with tears of suffering. The Lord always visits us there, while we are dry on the inside, truly thirsting for living water and reaching out for Him in what we know, deeply and seriously.

The Lord comes and attends to us in our oneness. He stands at a distance. He passes by us, as the text of the Gospel says. He does not impose Himself, but rather waits for us. He addresses us in our own language. If we accept dialogue, if we learn how to respond and say, "have mercy on me," even if He appears to us as a stranger, even if we do not know His name, He enters into dialogue with us and eliminates the rattling of our passions. He extinguishes the flame of their darts and transforms the roar of our thoughts into a spring welling up within us so that we may be revived, casting off of us every worry so that we can remain Christ's.

Where do we stand when we are afflicted, after having fallen into evil, after darkness sweeps our souls? What prayer do we pray? Do we trust that God Himself will come down to us if we pray? Do we know that God wants us to serve Him, to enter into dialogue with us?

Of course, God is able to respond in any case and He does respond whether or not we ask because He knows what we need. Nevertheless, the Lord prefers to speak to us so that we will be trained in His friendship. He seeks this familiarity with us, the familiarity of children with their father. This is what we ask of Him in the divine liturgy before we recite the Lord's Prayer, when we say, "And make us worthy, O Lord, to dare to call upon You as Father."

God wants to be among us, to be live among us, so that we know we have risen up to the rank of divinity and so that we know that God has gone down to the ranks of humanity. If God comes to our souls as they



are, as we are accustomed to their being— in their meanness and in their filthiness— if God comes to these souls, then He is their Healer.

The ultimate temptation of suffering is for us to become attached to our suffering, for us to close the windows on ourselves entirely and be suffocated inwardly. Our hearts wither, our minds fall silent, our consciences languish, and so we die spiritually. Man does not suffocate only in his lungs. He suffocates when he refuses to open the windows when he feels that he cannot breathe, because if he opens the windows of his heart to heaven, then the Lord will come to him and speak with him and dialogue is breathing and recovery.