

A Modern Day Crucifixion

Some years ago I went to a crucifixion. It took place in the Intensive Care Unit at the Hospital where I was in training for hospital chaplaincy. This twentieth-century crucifixion was a bitter-sweet reminder for me of the mystery of the cross, whose power can only be experienced and never understood.

The story began on a Sunday, the first day of what was to become an extraordinary Holy Week. In the midst of a routine visit to the Unit, I noticed a patient sitting up in his bed eating his dinner. I noticed him for three reasons. One, there was the tell-tale fuchsia sign over his cubicle, the sign containing a list of precautionary directions for hospital workers, the sign that spelled out AIDS for those in the know. Two, this patient was noticeable because he was sitting up. His vertical position seemed unusual in this unit of generally horizontal persuasion. To be in an Intensive Care Unit is to be one who needs to lie down, not sit up. And three, I noticed him because he was, in a word, as my daughters would have put it, a "hunk." He was one of the most beautiful young men I've ever seen. He was tall and dark skinned, of Puerto Rican extraction, thin, but not wasted, fine-boned, large brown eyes that seemed to look right through you, a head of dark, thick, shiny hair that one would kill for. His manner, his bearing, and his gestures exuded a kind of power and charisma.

He was sitting up eating his supper with some difficulty. In one hand he held an oxygen mask, in the other his fork. He would take a forkful of food, chew for a few seconds, and then place the mask over his nose and mouth and breathe deeply for a minute. There was a rhythm to this activity, a focused concentration which seemed to elevate mundane actions to the level of music and dance. He was, I discovered, a dancer and a choreographer.

There was a moment of awkwardness when he looked up to see this strange man staring at him. Then I introduced myself, apologised for staring, asked if I might come back later, and expressed the fact that I had never seen anyone eat and breathe with so much grace. He smiled, and all my clinical detachment flew out the window. He was somehow in charge of our transaction, and he spoke not a word.

Later, when I returned, his family had arrived. His mother, his father, his brother, and an ex-girlfriend who was now a good friend. It was obvious that his family adored him. He was their shining star, their pride and joy. They stroked his brow, patted his arm, held his hand, smoothed his hair, and murmured sounds of constant encouragement. I glanced through his chart at the nurses' station. Steve, age 30, Roman Catholic. Diagnosis: Pneumocystis Pneumonia. Warning: family not to be told of the patient's condition. Patient also requests not to be put on life-supporting breathing apparatus.

Linda, the girlfriend, drew me aside to explain. "He's only come out as being gay in the last few years, and he doesn't want to disappoint his family. They've always been so close, especially he and his dad, and he knows how

orthodox they are in their religious beliefs. Mother Church knows best. So they think he just has some unusually severe pneumonia. He doesn't want them to know he's gay." So I kept quiet.

The next day, Monday, when I went back to the unit, I saw Steven lying flat on his back with a breathing tube down his throat. Apparently, he had awakened in the middle of the night to find himself drowning in his own fluid, and, in a natural reflex of panic, he had requested the tube. Was I never to hear the sound of his voice? His family had all but taken up residence in the waiting room. Night and day, they visited him in his cubicle, together and in shifts. Faithful disciples tending to this special son. I thought of the many people with AIDS lying in loneliness with no one to soothe their fevered brows, no none for whom they might be shining stars. But then, Steven's parents believed that he only had a difficult pneumonia from which he would surely recover. After all, he was a dancer, young, in good physical condition, and so full of power and natural magnetism, on the brink of so much success. He was a fighter. He had the will, the grace, and the talent. Steve communicated loving notes to his family with his pencil and large yellow pad.

By Wednesday night, however, his condition was deteriorating. he was weaker, his handwriting less sure. The tubes attached to his body seemed to multiply. Morphine was added to his medication programme. Steven's mother decided it was time to call in some outside specialist to look into the matter. The hospital doctors didn't seem to be helping. Linda was feeling the burden of the secret knowledge which couldn't be revealed. The doctor confided to me his sense that Steven would probably not make it through the week. His body was beginning to bloat from kidney malfunctioning. His vital signs were weakening. His mother called the specialist.

Linda could bear her burden no longer. She confronted Steven early Thursday morning. "Please tell them," she said. "You're not being fair to them or to yourself. They will probably find out anyway after you're gone. There are papers to sign which name this disease. And then they will be left having to deal with an important aspect of you with only a grave to talk to. Don't let them go through this alone. Don't hold back from them such a vital part of you. Do this for them and trust the love that exists between you." Steven wrote on his pad with great effort: "I'll think about it."

All that Thursday Steven lay in his garden of Gethsemane, his garden lush with tubes and machines and plastic bags. He could no speak to us of his struggle, he was too weak to write all his thoughts on that yellow pad. I dared not suggest that the truth would set everyone free, for I would not be paying the price. This was between Steven and his God. It was his choice to make, his risk to take.

Friday morning, Steven's pad contained the following words: "I have AIDS. I am Gay." No amount of morphine could have dulled the pain of that day. His mother stood by him, her love never wavered, but she knew now that he would die. His brother stayed also, though we never knew what he thought. But his father was angry, his anger fashioned a cross for Steven. His words cut into Steven's flesh like the stinging thongs of a scourging whip, like nails

piercing skin and muscle and nerve tissue, like the sharp points of thorns digging in to the head, sending acute laser-like pains throughout the face and deep into the ears. "You brought this disease upon yourself. It is God's judgement for your sin. I have no sons who are fags, and so you are not my son. I disown you. You did this to us, and you can rot in Hell!" And he walked out. He did not stop to see the new words Steven was laboriously writing on his pad in large shaky letters which could no longer follow the lines. "I love you." Dad was gone. Steve was no longer his father's shining star. He was cast out.

All day Saturday, the father stayed away. And Steven's beauty deteriorated further. He had now no "form or comeliness that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him ... he was despised and we esteemed him not." Yet, his mother, his brother, and Linda stood by. He could not speak to them of his loneliness and despair. He was doing a mighty work of love, and he was doing it by himself. He had chosen this path. Now he could only endure.

On Sunday, the father returned. He remained alone in the cubicle with his son. Later he told us of some of the conversation.

"Steven, you have turned my world upside down. All day yesterday, I was angry. All night, I did not sleep. I was angry that you had not told me sooner. I was angry that you told me at all. I was angry because it seemed as though you were making me choose between my moral beliefs and my son, my church and you. I have been taught that the Church speaks for God and says that being a homosexual is wrong and AIDS is a consequence of Sin. But I love you and so now nothing is clear anymore, and I don't know what this disease is saying to me. I wanted you to tell me you were sorry. I do not say that I will ever understand about this Gay business, but you are my son and I know of your goodness. I have memories of our closeness, and so I must wrestle with all that you are and to love all that you are, not just the pieces that fit in with my Church's rules. So now I tell you that it is I who am sorry, and I ask your forgiveness." There were tears. There was joy. The rest was all private, the kind of communing that occurs between people who have resolved their differences and are reconciled. It was a Sunday event.

Three hours later, Steven slipped into a coma and died. We were all with him, and he died in peace. The father tore off the page from Steven's pad which said, "I have AIDS. I am Gay" and which also said, down at the bottom in large five-year-old letters, "I love you." He folded it carefully and put it in his pocket. The last words of the boy who was, and would remain, his shining star.

Had our small group experienced the power and meaning of that first crucifixion of long ago? The one which made all subsequent crucifixions possible to bear as a continuing sign of the ability of love to overcome fear and anger and hate? Jesus Christ's self-offering to God for the world produced a cross which he willingly embraced so that we might be reconciled to God. With God's grace, Steven's self-offering to his family also produced a cross which he bore in hope that there would be a reconciliation. An instrument of death

became a vehicle for new life, new growth, new possibilities. The vulnerable victim became the powerful victor. Christ is made present once again: It seems to happen again and again, especially in those places of suffering and weakness. It makes no sense at all. The cross is folly to our logical Greek minds. But it happened, and it continues to happen. In this life we can never fully understand it, but the cross is God's work and it is for us, not against us. We can only receive the grace to be open to it, and then know the cross as the place of profound joy and peace.

Steven's doctor, knowing nothing of what had transpired, had some final words to say to me, words well-intentioned but full of irony in the light of this story. "Too bad," he said, "too bad that Steven succumbed to panic last week and asked for that breathing tube. He and his family could have been spared this extra week of suffering."

How could I have explained it?

In the end, it is a matter for proclamation, not explanation!

Amen.