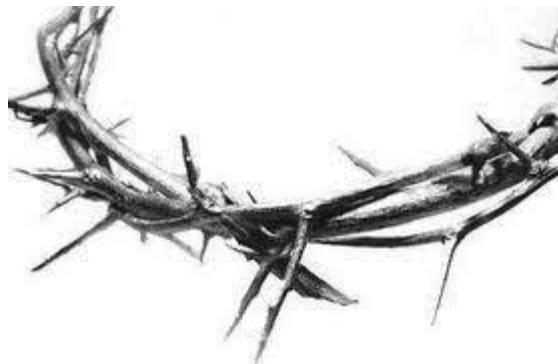


The Serving Africa Mission

Prayer Store

The wounds of intercession



We were so proud
but when the storm came
it tore away our hope
and left us wasted.

One sorrow

The Lord looked down from heaven
and saw what we had become
and his heart was filled with sorrow

Two sorrows

Blood dripping
calling
one love

This material needs to be read alongside “Into the Flow” and “Pulling down the Power” both available from www.visionworld27.org

Introduction

The last years of the life of St. Francis were marked by the presence of the stigmata. This unusual phenomenon occurs in the lives of those who devote themselves intensely to meditation on the passion of Jesus. The wounds of the cross become real in their lives. Here is the relevant passage from the Life of St Francis:-

“As his understanding sought in vain for an explanation and his heart was filled with perplexity at the great novelty of this vision, the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them slightly earlier in the crucified man above him. His wrists and feet seemed to be pierced by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on his wrists and on the upper sides of his feet, the points appearing on the other side. The marks were round on the palm of each hand but elongated on the other side, and small pieces of flesh jutting out from the rest took on the appearance of the nail-ends, bent and driven back. In the same way the marks of nails were impressed on his feet and projected beyond the rest of the flesh. Moreover, his right side had a large wound as if it had been pierced with a spear, and it often bled so that his tunic and trousers were soaked with his sacred blood.”

We have to accept that we do not fully understand this experience, although Padre Pio (padrepio.org.uk) claimed a similar experience, and has influenced the lives of many people.

Deep intercessory prayer has unusual experiences in it, and as I have reflected on intercession, I have become aware of a similar stigma - not of the marks of the cross, but of the wounds which accompany deep intercession. I have described them here. “Wound” in this context is a spiritual word. It is something which penetrates us at a very deep level, weighs heavily on us, and dictates how we can live in the intercessory world. I can’t describe it any more clearly - I hope its meaning will emerge as we look at what it means in various contexts.

Why bother with this exploration? I hope that, along with the other material mentioned above, it will encourage intercessors, and bring others into the intercessory experience.

The wound of his presence

Experience:-

* One day, I was standing in the Lord's presence when he began to share his heart with me. Such sorrow and pain overwhelmed me. More and more it came, forcing me to the ground. I could hardly stand it, and when I was at the end of myself, I cried out "Lord, stop! Remember my humanity."

* I was standing in a vast plain. It stretched away as far as the eye could see in every direction. It was completely empty - no trees, houses, fences, roads - nothing. I felt very alone, and I was very exposed. Then the Lord spoke - "For as far as you can see, and as far as you can go, there is still more of me. No matter how far you travel, you will never get to the end of me." I became aware of his greatness, and felt very small and weak.

Unusual starting point

This is, in many ways, an unusual place to start. We all love to feel the presence of the Lord, and that is natural and right. So how can this presence be described as a wound? In our everyday Christian life it isn't, but we are not dealing with everyday Christian life, but with deep intercession. In this environment, things are different. Let's look at these verses:-

Where can I go from your Spirit?

**Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
 if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
 if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
 your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
 and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
 the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.** (Ps. 139: 7-12)

The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord on me. I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—deeply distressed. (Ezekiel 3:14)

In these passages, the presence of the Lord is a tough experience, and one from which there is no escape. When the Spirit touches the intercessor in this way, it is a burden, a troubling, a disturbing. It goes on and on, and like the Psalmist, we despair of any escape.

These verses show us how the presence of the Lord becomes a “wound.” Unlike the joyful presence of the Lord, it is deeply disturbing. Yet it is the beginning of intercession, and also the heart. But do we have the courage to stay with it, as it hurts us more and more? Or are we going to cry “Lord stop! Remember my humanity?” The wound of his presence is a challenging beginning.

I am hearing
More
Still hearing
More
and feeling
More
and hurting
More
Still hearing and feeling and hurting.
More
Can't bear any more
More
Stop, I am hurting
More

God help me this is breaking me apart

More

More

More

The wound of waste

Experience:-

* George was slumped in his chair. Once a tall strong man, he had been brought low by a cancer which was relentless. He could hardly talk, but there was still brightness in his eyes. As I sat with him, I could hear someone crying on the verandah behind me. I looked round, and saw his wife weeping in the arms of her daughter. I went over. "What is it?" I asked. "I can't stand to see him wasting away before my eyes" she sobbed. I looked across to George. He had witnessed all of this. His pain and hers filled me. I felt the waste, the despair, the emptiness of the future.

* When the gas cloud enveloped Halabja, Hamida Mahmoud tried to save her two year old daughter by allowing her to nurse at the breast. She thought the child would not breathe the gas if she was breast feeding. Hamida died with the child still at the breast.

* I had a vision of a bridge. "Cross it" said the Lord. When I did, I found myself in a desolate and lonely place. Everything was grey, broken, wasted. "Where am I?" I asked. "This is the waste" said the Lord, and he was overwhelmed with sadness, which swept over me and grieved my heart.

It hurts

"The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed festivals. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her young women grieve, and she is in bitter anguish." (Lam 1:4)

There is such sadness in God's heart when he sees the pain of waste to us, and knows that he cannot step in and stop it.

In intercession, this sadness cuts us like a knife, and we are wounded. I can still see the look in the eyes of the couple facing death, feel the awfulness of Hamid's death, and in my mind see the living baby dropping from the breast. In these stories is captured the waste of creation, of life, of hope, or a future.

This pain - God's pain - will never leave me while I want to intercede before him. I am permanently wounded - the stigmata of intercession have seared my emotions forever. Do I have the courage to be wounded in this way? But why should I? Surely prayer is enough. May be in daily life, but not for intercession. We come close to a wounded God - what else can we expect but to be wounded?

*Clinging to your breast
for life - or death?*

*"Mummy there is no milk,
there is no breath."*

*She slips away
She falls away*

*Silence
except the pain
I cannot bear.
God help me.*

The wound of the progress of the enemy

Experience:-

- * During the Pontus genocide, as the Pontians were being killed, one of the Turks shouted “Where is your Christ now?”
- * Ali Hassan al-Majid. (Chemical Ali), who was responsible for Halabja said- “I will kill them with chemical weapons. The international community - who is going to say anything? The International community - **** them.” He did kill them, and the international community did almost nothing. (Executed for war crimes 25/01/2010)

Disheartening

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. (John 10:10)

It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. (Rev 13:17)

The enemy seems to find it so easy to make progress. I could add many more examples from the political, social, intellectual and financial fields. Especially in the West, the voice of God seems to count for little, and the enemy finds it so easy to advance. Intercessors can easily be downhearted. We seem to make so little difference.

Why doesn't God intervene? That's not the question for intercessors. We have to share the wounded heart of God for the progress of the enemy, which does so much damage to his creation, his people and his plans. It's hard to bear such a pain day after day. But we have a choice - become downhearted, disillusioned and defeated, or accept the wound for what it is - access to the heart of God, where we can stand in the flow, and mirroring the heart of Jesus, intercede with him to Father.

Here we begin to see the value of the stigmata of intercession. The wounds offer us an alternative route to despair or surrender. If we have the courage to accept them, our intercession becomes truly an entychano experience. (For “entychano” see “Into the Flow.”) But being wounded is not easy.

The poem by Michael the Solitary expresses the pain which this generates in us. The poem by Gentle Claire soothes us. But we still have to be wounded - how else can we pray?

Michael the solitary

*Ruined hope floods my soul with despair.
Darkness crushes with iron. Prison calls.
The dove, robbed of freedom dies
I cry.*

*A broken hand touches mine.
“These are the wounds I bear.
Now you must bear them too.”*

I cry - I don't know why.

Gentle Claire

*Gently now.
To bear the burden of the world
is too much pain.*

Gently now.

To ask to share his heart
is an easier wound
for it leads to love.

Gently now.
Be gathered to his heart
and let him
light
the lonely path
with hope.

The wound of exposure to the enemy

Experience

* In March 2013 a bomb went off on a bus in Jerusalem and Scottish Bible translator Mary Jean Gardner was killed in the blast. She was the only person to die in the attack which left 30 wounded. “We are really, really reeling from all this,” said a spokesperson for Wycliffe said. “We've had students coming here for 10 years and this is the first time anything like this has happened. The shock of the evil behind the killing of civilians for the sake of killing is hard to take.”

* Jean Donovan gave her life to El Salvador. On December 2nd, 1980 this happened:-

In the afternoon of December 2, Donovan and Dorothy Kazel picked up two Maryknoll missionary sisters, Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, from the airport. Acting on orders from their commander, five National Guard members of the National Guard of El Salvador, out of uniform, stopped the vehicle they were driving after they left the airport in San Salvador. Donovan and the three sisters were taken to a relatively isolated spot where they were beaten, raped, and murdered by the soldiers.

At about 10:00 p.m. local peasants had seen the sisters' white van drive to an isolated spot and then heard machine-gun fire followed by single shots. They saw five men flee the scene in the white van, with the lights on and the radio blaring.

Early the next morning they found the bodies of the four women, and were told by local authorities—a judge, three members of the civil guard, and two commanders—to bury the women in a common grave in a nearby field. Four of the local men did so, but informed their parish priest, and the news reached the local bishop and the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, the same day. The shallow grave was exhumed the next day, on Thursday, December 4, in front of fifteen reporters, Sisters Alexander and Dorsey and several missionaries, and Ambassador White. Donovan's body was the first removed; then Kazel's; then Clarke's; and last, Ita Ford.

* Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was murdered as he celebrated Mass on 24 March 1980. Here is an eye witness report:-

"When he finished his sermon, he walked to the middle of the altar; at that moment, the shot rang out," says Sister Luz Isabel, who was among the congregation at a private chapel in El Salvador's capital, San Salvador.

"It sounded like a bomb explosion. Monsignor Romero held on to the cloth on the altar for a moment and pulled it off. Then he fell backwards and lay bleeding at the feet of Christ."

During his three years as Archbishop, Oscar Romero urged an end to the violence and defended the right of the poor to demand political change, a stance which made him a troublesome adversary for the country's oligarchy.

Dangerous

Exposure to the enemy, to the beast, is ugly and dangerous. The women in El Salvador were raped before they died. Archbishop Ramero fell into his own blood. Mary was ripped apart. The beast has teeth, and he uses them. Let's stop pretending. Jesus was ripped by the scourging, beaten in the body with real fists, had spit in his face, and then died surrounded

by his own blood. Standing against the enemy is a rough game. We should not be surprised:-

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan 3:16-18)

He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:41-44)

In many ways, we should call this the “Gethsemane wound.” In Gethsemane, isolated and alone, tired and acutely aware of danger, Jesus had to intercede. He could not reject this wound, but had to take it into his soul and into his body - both were at risk.

This wound penetrates our physical existence. We are in danger - real danger from being raped, shot, abused, abducted, tortured and torn apart. Most of us are not of course, but that is what the beast wants to do, and will if he gets the slightest opportunity. This wound will ensure that we pray as though it is a very real possibility. Why must we absorb this wound? It is the only way to safety. If we draw our physical bodies into this wound, then the enemy can have no hold over us. That’s what Shadrach is trying to tell us. If the furnace waits, so be it. If not, we are vulnerable. Not an easy choice is it? Not an easy wound.

The wound of struggling to endure and overcome in the face of indifference

Experience

* I once had this picture: A group of God's people arrived at the foot of a mountain, and began to walk up. The way got steeper, but I pressed on. As I got higher, I noticed that there were less people with me. Up and up we went, along a very steep path. I called out "Wow. The view is brilliant. Let's press on." But there was no answer, and when I looked around I was walking alone. "Where are they Lord?" I asked. "Look" he said. I turned round, and saw, down the mountain, at different places where the land was flat, tents pitched, and people walking around. "What has happened Lord?" "Go and ask" he said, so I went down to the nearest group and asked "What are you doing here? We have far to climb. The best is in the highest places." "Oh no" they replied. "We saw this nice flat place, with grass, and a view. This is where God wants us to be. We will stay here." "But God wants us to go on" I replied. "We are a pilgrim people." "You are wrong" they shouted. "You are misleading us. Here is our place."

I looked to the Lord, and saw the pain in his eyes. I climbed alone to the highest place. "Sorry Lord" I said. "Only I have come."

* I was invited to speak to a town wide gathering of Christians and I chose to speak about the danger facing their nation. As the message went on, I became aware that more and more people were losing interest. "Keep going" said the Lord. I did, but felt a lot of hostility. In the coffee area afterwards, most people avoided me. Eventually one came and said "We come here to hear good news, not the doom stuff you are speaking."

Hard to endure sometimes

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given

over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Cor 4:7-12)

When I started out in my prophetic ministry, I was full of optimism. But I soon discovered that people do not want to hear what God is saying - they want to hear what they want to hear God is saying! There is a difference. I had to fight against discouragement, but it was, and still is very hard. It's a feeling God understands. Look at these two verses, and think how discouraged he must have been:-

"Call to me and I will answer you." (Jer.33:3)

"When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the LORD Almighty." (Zech. 7:13)

We could add Jeremiah's experience to this. He knew all about wounds. He got so anxious that he tried to give up, but the fire burnt him. (Jer.20:9) Giving up is not an option for us.

This lack of response is not seen as a problem by God's people. They just carry on regardless. But for those of us who stand close to God in intercession, this indifference is very wounding, and that's the way to endure it. This indifference, this lack of desire to endure, to reach God's purposes, to overcome - this is a wound of intercession. If we can accept it, then we draw its sting, and rob it of the ability to stop us.

*Lord I've tried so hard
And now I am tired.
I cannot go again
I cannot climb
I cannot stand
I cannot hope
I am alone
and lost.*

He puts his hand in mine
“Come on” he says
“Let’s try again
- together.”

The wound of loneliness and rejection

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.
(John 1:11)

“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. (Matt 27:42)

In the end, when we get to the bottom of it, intercession is a Gethsemane to Calvary experience. Often lonely, often opposed and rejected, often defeated, often crucified. What else can I say? This is how it is, and if we don’t like it, then to be blunt - don’t join.

I offered you my beauty
but you scarred it.
I offered you my life
but you took it.
I offered you my heart
but you broke it.
I have nothing left to give
and you laughed.

The wound of love

“The soul is wounded with love for its spouse.” (Teresa of Avila)

*Softly you come to me
falling on me
like snowflakes,
drifting into my soul,
healing my wounds
with love.*

*Softly I reach out for you
longing
with all my heart
to know your touch.*

*Softly,
I fall asleep
into your arms*

Softly forever

Jesus looked at him and loved him. (Mark 10:21)

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:13)

Experience

Prisoners at Auschwitz were slowly and systematically starved, and their pitiful rations were barely enough to sustain a child: one cup of imitation coffee in the morning, and weak soup and half a loaf of bread after work. When food was brought, everyone struggled to get his place and be sure of a portion. Father Maximilian Kolbe however, stood aside in spite of the ravages of starvation, and frequently there would be none left for him. At other times he shared his meager ration of soup or bread with others.

In order to discourage escapes, Auschwitz had a rule that if a man escaped, ten men would be killed in retaliation. In July 1941 a man from Kolbe's bunker escaped. The dreadful irony of the story is that the escaped prisoner was later found drowned in a camp latrine, so the terrible reprisals had been exercised without cause. But the remaining men of the bunker were led out.

'The fugitive has not been found!' the commandant Karl Fritsch screamed. 'You will all pay for this. Ten of you will be locked in the starvation bunker without food or water until they die.' The prisoners trembled in terror. A few days in this bunker without food and water, and a man's intestines dried up and his brain turned to fire.

The ten were selected, including Franciszek Gajowniczek, imprisoned for helping the Polish Resistance. He couldn't help a cry of anguish. 'My poor wife!' he sobbed. 'My poor children! What will they do?' When he uttered this cry of dismay, Maximilian stepped silently forward, took off his cap, and stood before the commandant and said, 'I am a Catholic priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children.'

Astounded, the icy-faced Nazi commandant asked, 'What does this Polish pig want?' Father Kolbe pointed with his hand to the condemned Franciszek Gajowniczek and repeated 'I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children.'

Observers believed in horror that the commandant would be angered and would refuse the request, or would order the death of both men. The commandant remained silent for a moment. What his thoughts

were on being confronted by this brave priest we have no idea. Amazingly, however, he acceded to the request. Franciszek Gajowniczek was returned to the ranks, and the priest took his place.

Father Kolbe was thrown down the stairs of Building 13 along with the other victims and simply left there to starve. Hunger and thirst soon gnawed at the men. Some drank their own urine, others licked moisture on the dank walls. Maximilian Kolbe encouraged the others with prayers, psalms, and meditations on the Passion of Christ. After two weeks, only four were alive. The cell was needed for more victims, and the camp executioner, a common criminal called Bock, came in and injected a lethal dose of carbolic acid into the left arm of each of the four dying men. Kolbe was the only one still fully conscious and with a prayer on his lips, the last prisoner raised his arm for the executioner. His wait was over.

So it was that Father Maximilian Kolbe was executed on 14 August, 1941 at the age of forty-seven years, a martyr of charity.

Tough love

We find it hard to understand the heart of God. We have emotions and a nature which is able to interpret the flow of those emotions in each other, but often fail to do the same for God. Yet we are made in his image, which means that, like us, he has feelings and emotions.

God has emotions, and from the depths of those emotions, he loves. It isn't an intellectual love, but an emotional one. It cannot be comprehended by reason, so can it be comprehended by emotion? That depends on our willingness to be open to the depth of that love. It is a call which will resonate in our emotions. It can have incredible power, and incredible pain. Enduring this emotional pain is really hard for us, because it has no end. Who can truly comprehend the depth of God's love? It's a love which shakes and disturbs. It's a love that cries in the wilderness, cries from Gethsemane and cries from the cross. It's a love of longing and suffering all rolled into one. It is a privilege to feel such love.

I remember the first time I began to understand the depths of God's emotional nature. Many years ago, he said to me, "Come up here and I will show you the things which are to come." I didn't want to accept this invitation, because I didn't have the courage to face what the future might hold. But some months later, he asked again, and this time I accepted. I found myself in the heavenly places, and I was very apprehensive at what he would show me. But when I looked, all I saw was God, and his heart was broken. I was stunned. "Who has done this?" I asked. "My creation", he replied. "I love my creation, and yet it crucifies me again and again." I said, "I am just a small man. What can I possibly do?" After a long silence, he said, "Share my pain."

It took me quite a long time to adjust my spiritual thinking to what I had experienced, but over the years I have grown more able to hear and feel the heart of God.

There are some places in the Bible where we can begin to study this love, and its associated pain. One such place is in the life of the prophet Hosea. Commanded by God to marry a prostitute, and buy her out of her prostitution, again and again she returns to her old ways. This is a picture of God's relationship with his people. He keeps calling them back to himself, but they keep returning to their old ways. Eventually, God reveals his heart in this passage:-

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them. "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath. They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west." (Hosea 11:1-10)

We can also look to Gethsemane, where the intense cost to God of loving us is shown so clearly. Of course seeing it is not enough. We have to have the courage to enter into it for ourselves.

“He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (Luke 22: 42-44)

Finally, we must go to Calvary.

“At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33-34)

This love pours out from the heart of God all of the time. It sweeps across the world, and we all move in it all the time. Some feel it, and many don’t, but we are all in it. It is like a great ocean, sweeping around all of us. Christians move in it, and so do all unbelievers. There is no escape from the compassion of God.

To move in such a stream is healing and blessing, but it is the “one way” nature of it which hurts so much. God has poured out his very life at Calvary. Yet most do not respond. What more has he got to do? How long must he endure? How many more Gethsemans must he pass through until we wake up to his love? And do any of his people hear? Even more painfully, so any care? Yet on and on he goes – calling, loving.

To stand in that love, to hear it, feel it, and go on and on feeling it strips our emotions bare, leaves them raw and exposed. And then – there’s more, and more, and more.

This love has to change us first and go on changing us. It is a pain to go on believing, hoping, trusting when love seems hopeless.

Teresa was right, and it hurts.

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