

Let me tell you a true story about the man who struggled with his faith after which he became renewed in it. He grew up in a Catholic family, was once quite active in the Church, and entered a seminary to study for the Priesthood.

Then came the turmoil of the Vietnam War. During this time, three students at a college in Ohio, USA were killed during campus protests against the Vietnam War. Race riots tore apart many cities. National leaders were assassinated. Suddenly, everything became unglued.

The young man left the seminary, joined the anti-war movement, left the Church, and began ridiculing the faith he wants and embraced.

His family was shocked by his change in attitude. And when his behaviour became more and more hostile to religion, they all but gave up hope.

Then came Holy Week and Good Friday of 1970. The young man, then twenty-two years old, was driving past a Catholic church. He recognised the name of a priest on the sign in front of the church. It was a priest he had once respected very much.

Something prompted him to stop his car and go inside the church. As he walked through the door, the Good Friday "Veneration of the Cross" was giving. He sat down in the very last pew. He watched people file up to reverence the cross while the choir sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Then, something remarkable happened. The young man writes, and I quote him exactly:

"Something inside me snapped and I began to cry. Overcome with emotion, I remembered the peace I had felt years ago in church. The simple faith I was witnessing now seemed more meaningful than what I had been professing. I got out of my seat and went down to kiss the Cross. The priest recognised me, came over, and embraced me."

"On that day," the young man said, "I became a born-again Catholic."

May I suggest the reason this young man became so interiorly moved relates to what he was trying to avoid. Still, what he was trying to avoid ended up being what he embraced when he realised that God embraces it, too.

What was he avoiding? Let me put the answer to that question in context.

America is the most powerful nation on earth; yet, the American soldiers came back from the Vietnam War defeated. Rather than be hailed as heroes, the US soldiers were looked down upon, ridiculed and spat upon, not unlike Jesus when He was on the Cross. The Jews expected Jesus to be a powerful King like King David who was known for his military power. Little did they know that Jesus' Kingdom would be one by which vulnerability is embraced, not shunned and avoided. For by embracing our vulnerability, we can be attentive to understand the vulnerability of others. This ability is the basis of compassion. Compassion is characterised by moving *towards* the vulnerability of others, not away from it in avoidance and projection.

Amazingly, God does not avoid vulnerability. In fact, God Himself is vulnerable. This characteristic of God is essentially what moved the young man when he heard the faithful singing, "Were you there

when they crucified my Lord?" The young man realised that God has revealed Himself as knowing what being vulnerable is like not merely from observing his vulnerable creatures, but also from his own experience. God revealed this most significantly on the Cross; yet, the Cross is not the only time Jesus embraced vulnerability. Think about it. Jesus embraced vulnerability throughout His entire life.

Jesus was:

- born as a defenseless baby in a manger (Lk. 2:7);
- the object of King Herod's desire to "search for the child to kill him" (Mt. 2:13 NIV);
- tempted by Satan (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13; Heb. 2:18; 4:15) and by Peter who was "a stumbling block" (Mt. 16:23);
- clearly certain that he could "do nothing by himself," for he could "do only what he sees the Father doing" (Jn. 5:19. See also Jn. 5:30; 8:28 JB);
- without a place to lay his head during his public ministry (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58);
- tired (Jn. 4:6);
- hungry and thirsty (Mt. 25:35-40; Mk. 11:12; Jn. 4:6-7; 19:28);
- driven out of Nazareth by all the people in the synagogue with the attempt to "hurl him off the cliff" (Lk. 4:28-29);
- considered by his own family to be "out of his mind" (Mk. 3:21; Jn. 10:19-20);
- known to feel the pain of others vicariously, as "he sighed" (Mk. 7:34);
- not able to enter a town in plain view (Mk. 1:45);
- tested (Mt. 16:1-4; 22:15, 23-46; Mk. 12:13-20; Lk. 10:25; 20:20-22; Jn. 8:1-11);
- misunderstood (Mt. 16:13-16, 22; 22:16; Mk. 4:38; 6:3; 12:14; Lk. 10:40; Jn. 2:19-20; 3:3-4; 6:60; 8:58; 9:16, 24, 29);
- taken advantage of (Mk. 10:37; Jn. 6:14, 26);
- rejected (Mt. 8:34; 21:42; Mk. 6:3; 12:10; Lk. 4:28-29; 17:25; 23:18; Jn. 1:11; 5:43; 12:48);
- targeted for arrest and stoning (Jn. 8:59; 9:31, 39);
- abandoned (Mt. 27:46; Jn. 6:66);
- hated (Jn. 15:18);
- betrayed (Mt. 10:4; 14:10, 21; 26:14-16, 21, 23-24, 46, 48; 27:3-4; Mk. 3:19; 14:11,18, 42, 44; Lk. 6:16; 22:4, 6, 21-22, 48; Jn. 6:64; 13:2, 11, 21; 18:2, 5; 21:20);
- "a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45);
- subject to grief, wept, and groaned (Mt. 14:13; Mk 3:5; 7:34; 8:12; Lk. 19:41-44; Jn. 11:33,35; Heb. 5:7), "troubled in spirit" (Jn 13:21), "greatly distressed and troubled" (Mk. 14:33 ESV), and "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mt. 26:38 NIV);
- falsely accused (Mk. 14:56-57,63; Jn. 9:33,36), even of being demon-possessed (Mk. 3:22-30; Jn. 7:20; 8:48; 9:20; 10:20);
- condemned to death and derided for crucifixion (Mt. 27:1-2, 22-26; Mk. 14:64; 15:13-15; Lk. 23:21; Jn. 19:6, 14-16);
- denied three times by Peter, the head of his apostles (Mt. 26:34, 69-74);
- in so much "agony" that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Lk. 22:44 ESV);
- mocked (Mt. 5:40; 9:24; 20:19; 27:29,31,41; Mk. 15:20,29,31; 22:63; Lk. 8:53; 16:14; 18:32; 23:11,35-36; Jn. 19:3);
- beaten and scourged (Mt. 14:65; 20:19; 26:67; 27:26,30; Mk. 10:34; 15:15,19; Lk. 18:33; 22:63-64; Jn. 18:23; 19:1,3,11); and
- crucified (Mt. 27:35; Mk. 15:24-25; Lk. 23:33,35; Jn. 19:18).

What is more, Jesus' experience of vulnerability was not merely *accidental* (cf. Jn. 19:11) and *external* (cf. Mt. 26:53-54), but *deliberate* (cf. Ps. 63:3; Jn. 10:18) and *internal* (cf. Mt. 26:36-44; Mk. 14:32-39; Lk. 22:39-44). The Son of God's vulnerability is a consequence of being so absorbed in his

Father that he desires to be totally empty of self so that he can be filially receptive to the self-giving gift of his Father (cf. Jn 13:3). The Son's vulnerability is the paradigm of his filial receptivity which brings about his capacity to be filled with the gift of his Father. Not just the Father's gifts, but the gift of the Father Himself. Thus, God experiences vulnerability from a profound perspective; namely: from the inside-out; not merely from the outside-in.

By deliberately embracing our own experiences of vulnerability – not only the circumstances in which this occurs from the events outside us, but attending to how we respond on the inside – we are able to participate in Jesus' self-emptying by letting go of our ego so that we, in Jesus, can be receptive to God the Father in the glory and splendor of His majesty. Interestingly, the Greek word, "exousia" not only means "vulnerable," but "power." St Paul is aware of this paradox, for God revealed to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Consequently, St Paul asserts: "So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).