

Great Lent at the Mission

His face was gray and unshaven. A worn sweater hung limply on his thin shoulders, his bare toes poked through the holes in his beat-up running shoes, his hair was long and shaggy. All these I hardly noticed, for this was Ray, as I had come to know him over the past few months. I had also come to know a bit his story, how he had lost his job, his home and his family, been over taken by drug addiction, and tried to commit suicide. He was by this time a regular at St John's. What arrested my attention that day were his eyes. Ray had one of the clearest, frankest pairs of brown eyes I have ever seen. But today they were shadowed, hooded under heavy lids; his gaze, normally so direct, was diffuse and unfocused.

"D'you have anything I can eat?" he asked in his down-east accent. His voice was as gray ash his face. I didn't ask for explanations, but went to hunt up something in the kitchen. He poured a cup of coffee for each of us and came to talk to me while I found him some dinner, plus extra food to take away with him for he had nothing.

As it happened we had plenty, because we were preparing for Easter breakfast. It was late on the afternoon of Good Friday. While awaiting the evening service, we were readying the dining-room and making up trays for Sunday morning, for the new dawn. After keeping vigil at the tomb this Friday, we would meet in the hushed night of Holy Saturday and wait, together in the darkness, for the new fire. When it arrived we would rush forward to take light from the Light that never fades, and the darkness of the night would be shattered, set on fire with the New Life brought by the One who trampled down death by death... The rejoicing would last the night through, until the new dawn came to light the world as our fire had lighted the chapel. Then we would spill out into the dining-room, abundant with flowers and food and drink and candles and all our finest things. Around this table the celebration would continue, the joy of the Pascha Eucharist overflowing in to our feasting as the joy of Christ's love overflows the hearts of all whom he has called to this New Life.

But all this was yet to come. The Forty Days had brought us at last to Good Friday. In fasting and prayer and good works, we had entered with Christ and his disciples in to the desert of Lent. At St John's Mission Parish, the Lenten desert is easy to find. Our Mission is in the heart of urban Toronto, on a busy city street noisy with streetcars and other traffic. Just up the street are the city jail, a home for refugees, and a place for battered women; across from us is a large public-housing complex; down the street are the local strip joint and the hidden corners where teenagers are prey for prostitution and drug use. At St John's, the darkness of the night is no mere metaphor. Its shadow is all round us, and comes inside with every person who comes here. The hungry, the lonely, the poor, the lost: these are the invited guests at our table, for it is the table of Christ, and these are his beloved. We try to live what our patron, St John the Compassionate told his flock in busy, thriving Alexandria, of which he was bishop in the sixth century: "those whom you call poor and outcast, these are my masters and teachers, for they alone are able to help us and bestow upon us the Kingdom of Heaven."

And so we learn from these, our masters and teachers, what Lent is really about. We learn what it means to be seduced and led into the wilderness, to hunger and thirst with Christ in his poor, to know a little bit their hopelessness and emptiness. In Canada, even our poor are rich – maternally rich – compared with the unfathomable poverty in most of the world. Here, our poverty is a poverty of spirit; of lives empty and pointless, of death not by physical starvation but by relentless starvation of all that is truly human. These, the useless and forgotten, the unimportant and alone, are the heart of St John's Mission Parish. It is with them that we learn what it means to die and rise with Christ. With them we learn what it means to be invited to His Table, that banquet table which is filled with those whom the world rejects as unworthy.

On most Fridays, St John's is open for drop-in and lunch. Together, we sit and eat with anyone who wants to be at our table. The poor themselves help prepare the meals and cleanup. For those who want only food, there is plenty. For those who want to talk to someone, or a little companionship, or a quiet place, it's here. For those who want something deeper, there is much more.

But today, Good Friday, the Mission's usual operations had ceased; our work was to be at the cross and tomb of Christ. Ray felt the difference. He asked if there was some work he could do for us, and I gave him the task of setting the tables for Easter morning. He did it, beautifully, while I was making sandwiches for him to take away, using the cold cuts we had ready for Easter breakfast. While he ate, I sat and talked to him a bit. He was restless, hungry with a hunger that the food would never satisfy. I felt his desperation. I knew what was the focus of his desire.

When the evenings service began, the funeral service of Christ, he was sitting drinking coffee, surrounded by the empty waiting tables he had carefully prepared for us.

His presence, the living death of his situation, were part of the service that evening. It was not by chance that he, on the threshold of a death of his own, had come on this day when Christians dare, by clinging to Christ, to enter into death. We enter into death, knowing that it is already conquered and can never be victorious. But how could Ray know that?

While we kept vigil at Christ's tomb, Ray went out into the night. He went, taking with him the food I had prepared for him. He went, taking with him a bundle of cash we had waiting in the office to buy Easter flowers and treats, along with a new cordless phone we had just been given. He went to buy the drugs which were his living death. And at St John's, we learned in a new way the meaning of Good Friday, the depth of the suffering into which Christ's love penetrates, the depth of the love with which Christ meets the suffering.

He went, and we waited for the Easter fire to be kindled and for the light to come and shatter the darkness.