



Creative Suffering

'Since coming here,' said the prisoner, 'I've come much closer to God.'

Opal's quiet words were convincing. In turn, she was touched to learn that opal gemstones owe their beauty to immense pressure, bearing down on fragments of silica in water. This pressure produces their scintillating colours and makes them so precious. The parable appealed to her amidst the constraints of her detention. She could already perceive its creativity.

During the service which followed came two unaccompanied solos, the words particularly poignant when heard in a prison. After four years away from home, still without news of parole, a grieving American mother sang first.

'I am learning to wait on the Lord,' she sang, her voice and face expressing deep longing but also deep trust.

A gifted musician followed, with old words to a new tune, her rich voice unfaltering. I, for one, was moved as never before by the hymn 'Fight the good fight'. In that setting, the words acquired such clear focus;

*'Cast care aside, lean on thy Guide;
His boundless mercy will provide;
Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove,
Christ is its life, and Christ its love.*

*Faint not, nor fear, His arms are near;
He changes not, and thou art dear;
Only believe, and thou shalt see
That Christ is all in all to thee.'*

Doubtless, some of those behind bars were victims of someone else's drug dealing, perhaps by carrying a supposed present for a friend. We did not ask. Yet for a few, their relationship with the Lord himself was growing, as other ties were severed. The Easter message was again made plain; the risen Lord overcame evil to set its captives free. As his suffering was creative, so he can transform ours to be creative.

A friend recently reminded me about the nature of our Lord's work at the carpenter's bench. As a master craftsman, he purposefully carved the wood up into fragments which he then shaped. His first public mission statement (as well as his first experience of rejection) was in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). Perhaps some of the furniture there was his own handiwork, bearing silent witness to his creative planning.

When circumstances imprison us, or events carve us up, it is well to remember how, after painful and prolonged captivity, Joseph (and many another 'trusting soul') made the wonderful discovery that, through it all, 'God has made me...'. (Genesis 45:9)

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