

GREAT MISFORTUNE

Commentary by Peter Rollins

“It is sometimes claimed that, while questioning and uncertainty have a place in the life of faith, they are not useful for those who are suffering from pain and anxiety. At these times it is often said that people require certainties and that it is the church’s role to provide them. Apart from the fact that this view can seem a little patronizing,, for it suggest that people need simple answers when they are in pain because they would not be able to handle anything else, we must ask whether certainty is something that really brings comfort to the distressed.

In order to explore this let us borrow a distinction offered by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas between the saying and the said. When one speaks there is both the act of saying and the content that is communicated. These are intimately united in our everyday speech and are rarely distinguished. However we can, if we sit back and reflect, note how our speech involves both sounds and the information that these sounds convey. This distinction becomes clearer when we think of meeting someone who speaks a language that we do not understand. For here we become aware that the person is saying something, but we are unsure of what is being said.

In academic life the said is often privileged over the saying. What is important is that meaning is communicated and, as such the way it is communicated is important only insofar as it gets the meaning across. Yet there are forms of communication that give emphasis to the saying over the said.. . .

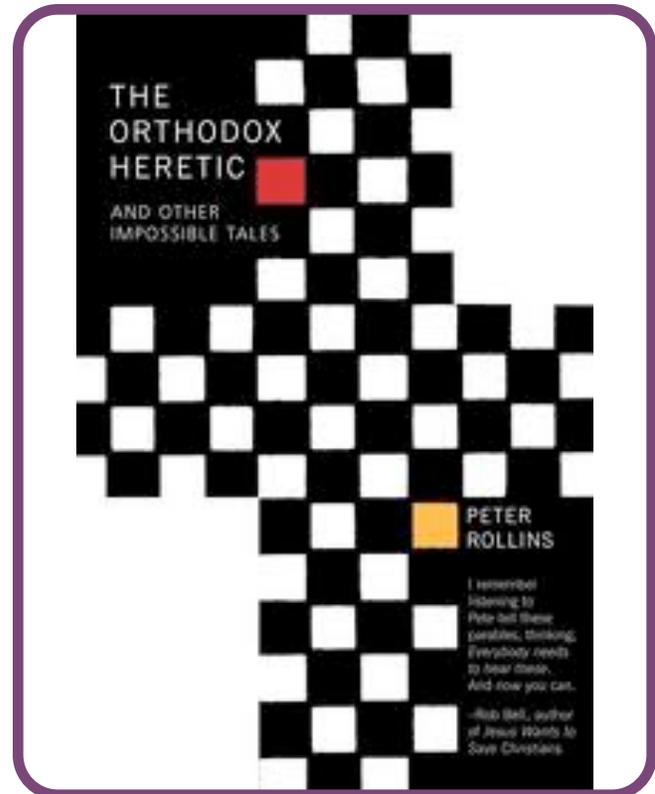
When we are facing difficult situations is it not true that the pastoral act is not one that offers some explanation for the suffering (the said) but rather is found in the act of one who offers presence to the other in the form of words and gestures (the saying)? Here it is not an explanation that brings healing and comfort, but rather the fact that someone is interacting with us, the fact that someone loves us and stands with us. What brings comfort is the fact that there is proximity to another and presence with another. It is the fact that flesh touches flesh and the gaze of the one who suffers meets the gaze of the one who cares. This act of gentle presence is balm for the wounded soul.”

(“The Orthodox Heretic” pages 39-41)

Lenten Evening Prayer

Ancient & Modern

PARABLES



“Religious writing is usually designed to make the truth of faith clear, concise, and palatable. Parables subvert this approach. In the parable, truth is not expressed via some dusty theological discourse that seeks to educate us, but rather it arises as a lyrical dis-course that would inspire and transform us...parables do not seek to change our minds but rather to change our hearts.” **PETER ROLLINS**

Lenten Evening Prayer

Parables

“**Parables** subvert the desire to make faith simple and understandable. they do not offer the reader clarity, for they refuse to be captured in the net of a single interpretation and instead demand our eternal return to their words, our wrestling with them, and our puzzling over them.

This does not mean that the words contain no message, or that they mock us as some insoluble puzzle (and thus not rally as a puzzle at all). Parables do not substitute sense for nonsense, or order for disorder. Rather, they point beyond these distinctions, inviting us to engage in a mode of reflection that has less to do with fixing meaning than rendering meaning fluid and affective.

A parable does not primarily provide information about our world. Rather, if we allow it to do its work within us, it will change, our world--breaking it open to ever-new possibilities by refusing to be held by the categories that currently exist within that world. In this way the parable transforms the way we hold reality, and thus changes reality itself.” (Peter Rollins)

Please begin your worship in quiet contemplation.



**We cannot dance, Lord,
unless you lead us.
If you want us to leap with abandon,
You must intone the song.
Then we shall leap into love,
From love into knowledge,
From knowledge into enjoyment,
And from enjoyment beyond
all human sensations.
There we want to remain,
yet want also to circle
higher still..**

Mechthild of Magdeburg 1212-1282

Abba Prayer

P: As Jesus taught us, we pray:

**Heavenly Mother, Heavenly Father
Holy and blessed is your true name.
We pray for your reign of peace to come.
We pray that your good will be done.
Let heaven and earth become one.
Give us this day the bread we need.
Give it to those who have none.
Let forgiveness flow like a river between us
From each one to each one to each one.
Lead us to holy innocence
Beyond the evil of our days:
Come swiftly Mother, Father, come.
For yours is the power
And the mercy, and the glory.
Forever your name is all one. Amen.**

Hymn: **#704 When Pain of the World Surrounds Us**

Benediction:

P: "Then we shall no longer complain.
Then everything that God has done with us
Will suit us just fine,
If you will now only stand fast
And keep hold of sweet hope." Amen

(Mechthild of Magdeburg - Soul Weavings)

Peace: *receive the peace of Christ
and share Christ's peace as you depart.*

Perhaps he is right, thought Benoni, maybe I should take some comfort from these words. But it is cold, I am alone, and words can offer no shoulder to rest on.

Just then the blacksmith knocked on the door and Benoni, as always, welcomed him in. As they sat together they drank whiskey and talked long into the night. That evening Benoni shared the words of the pastor with his friend, adding, "Perhaps now that I have been given these words to comfort me, you no longer need to visit as you have done this last year."

The blacksmith simply looked at the floor for a few moments and then replied, "My dear friend, if what the elder has said is true then I am needed all the more, for if you had to suffer much great misfortune in order to find strength of character and wealth of spirit, then this is in itself a great misfortune."

And so they sat late into the night bringing comfort and warmth to each other through the sharing of their lives.

Peter Rollins commentary on this parable is provided on the back of the bulletin.

Hymn: **#612 Healer of Our Every Ill**

Prayers of the Body

We will begin and end our prayers by singing the canon

May be sung in canon. Kristopher E. Lindquist

1 2 3 4

My spir - it rests in You a - lone, All my whole-ness comes from You.

Music & text © 2001, 2005 KEL. www.KELmusic.com

Invocation:

P: O Burning Mountain, O Chosen Sun, O Perfect Moon, O Fathomless Well, O Unattainable Height, O Unattainable Light, O Clearness Beyond All Measure, O Wisdom Without End, O Mercy Without all Limit, O Strength Beyond Resistance, O Crown of All Majesty,

C: All Creation humbly sings your praise!

(Mechthild of Magdeburg)

Evening Hymn: **#561 Joyous Light of Heavenly Glory**

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

P: We cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead us.
If you want us to leap with abandon,
You must intone the song.
Then we shall leap into love,
From love into knowledge,
From knowledge into enjoyment,
And from enjoyment beyond all human sensations.
There we want to remain, yet want also to circle
higher still. **C: Amen.**

(Mechthild of Magdeburg)

Psalmody:

#232 Let My Prayer Rise Up

the piano side is Group 1 and the north side Group 2

Silence for reflection

Litany:

P: And God Said to the Soul:
“I desired you before the world began.
I desire you now
As you desire me.
And where the desires of two come together
There Love is perfected.

C: **How the Soul Speaks to God**
“O God, you are my lover,
My longing,
My flowing stream,
My sun,
And I am your reflection.”

P: How God Answers the Soul
“It is my nature that makes me love you often,
For I AM love itself.
It is my longing
that makes me love you intensely,
For I yearn to be loved from the heart.
It is my eternity that makes me love you long,
For I have no end.

(Mechthild of Magdeburg)

Silence for reflection

Hymn: **#697 Just a Closer Walk with Thee**

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-7

A Reading from *The Orthodox Heretic*:

GREAT MISFORTUNE

THERE WAS ONCE AN OLD MAN BENONI who had known great misfortune through life, having lost his wife and children to poverty, disease, and war. The many lines on his face betrayed his pain, and his heart was filled with sorrow and regret. Indeed he barely had the strength to carry on.

But there was one who had drawn alongside him in his sorrow. His comforter was the village blacksmith, a strong but caring man who exhibited a gentle, humble, and charitable way of life. People knew very little about this blacksmith, as he was a quiet man who had moved into the town only a few years before. Yet he was well liked by the community and would often be found sitting on the porch of his workshop, enjoying the midday sun and passing the time by engaging strangers in conversation. His face was strong and full of character, betraying both a depth of spirit and a breadth of experience. But it was also a kindly face that was set alight by his compassionate smile.

When Benoni lost his first child, the blacksmith called round to his home, put his hand on Benoni's shoulder and with great affection said, “I am so sorry that you have suffered this grave misfortune. If you will allow me. I would like to stand with you at this time of hardship.”

Every since this first encounter the blacksmith had called round to Benoni's house most evenings, sometimes to sit and chat, sometimes to listen, and sometimes simply to leave food and other provisions. As each new calamity befell Benoni, the blacksmith would be there to speak and cry with.

One day when Benoni was particularly depressed he went to visit a pastor who lived in the heart of the city, so as to talk through what had taken place over the traumatic years and try to make sense of it. The pastor listened to what Benoni had to say and then, after a little thought, replied, “Well my son, in order for great fortune to take place one must first suffer great misfortune. The suffering you have faced is the price that has had to be extracted for strength of character, and a spirit forged in the fires of hell.”

So Benoni returned to his home alone, lit a fire in an attempt to take away the evening's chill, and contemplated the words of the minister.