



A Wisp of Hair

Brian Grogan SJ author of *To Grow in Love* (Messenger Publications) sheds some light on the question of finding hope and meaning in life's crosses.



Pope's Intention (evangelisation): That all who suffer may find hope in life, allowing themselves to be consoled and comforted by the love of the Heart of Jesus.

While suffering can often be brutal, it can also enter our lives silently and almost apologetically. It can also carry an unexpected message of grace, as we shall see. The author Douglas Christie tells the simple story that follows.

'One evening early in his mother's treatment for cancer he was sitting with her and his father at the dinner

table: she brushed her hand along her scalp, and a wisp of hair came loose.

She sat there for a moment looking at it,

as though not quite comprehending what she was seeing. Then she got up and left the room. He remained sitting there with his father, neither of them knowing what to do or say. He had been told this would happen, but suddenly, here it was before him: her hair, soft and wispy, resting in her hand. Now three people – his

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mother, his father and himself – had to learn how best to accommodate this unwelcome guest that would change their lives forever.'

Where is the touch of grace in this event? How is grace woven into my own unremarkable history of suffering? I sometimes ask God, 'Where are you in all of this? Is there a grace hidden here which you want me to discover?' I believe that God's central task is to help each of us to grow in love: we are to become more like God as life goes by. The former translation of a phrase in the short Eucharistic Prayer was startling in its directness: 'Make us grow in love!' God seems to employ suffering – which otherwise would be useless – to do just that; *to make us grow in love*. But how?

The clue is the fact that a similar pattern of suffering is in everyone else's life. This awareness can bond us to those we love, but also to people far and wide – to refugees and to the poor of the earth. In this way, so far as suffering breaks open our hearts to others, it has a positive value. Shortly before she took her own young life, a TV show presenter pleaded, 'In a world where you can be anything, be kind! You never know what is going on in someone else's life: never!' Her heartfelt message is a call to universal compassion. It echoes St Paul's vision that 'when one part of the body

suffers, the others do also' (1 Cor 12:26).

I can then ask, 'Are my sufferings softening my heart to others?' If I can say yes, this brings me hope and consolation, and helps me to endure patiently what I can't avoid.

Next, while suffering may be my quiet companion, another quiet companion keeps me going. God does not normally deal dramatically with suffering by cures and miracles. God comes closer than that: in the Psalms is the lovely line, 'My tears are stored in your flask' (Ps 56:8) – God notices my tears and promises to wipe them away. To wipe away another's tears is an intimate gesture.

But God comes closer yet: through the Incarnation God becomes one of us. Jesus dramatically reveals God's preferred way for dealing with unavoidable suffering: by accepting his Passion patiently and lovingly his suffering becomes transformative. When we turn to him on the cross we discover the love we need to endure well.

The love shown on Calvary is a beacon which enlightens the darkness of suffering. No suffering of mine – not even a fallen wisp of hair – is lost, because 'the hairs of your head are all counted' (Mt 10:30). Joined to the suffering of my unobtrusive divine companion my suffering becomes a great grace for the world. 