

When the writer Andre Dubus was in his early 50's, he pulled over late at night on a dark highway to help someone in need. Dubus was in great physical shape then; he ran 5 miles a day, a habit he formed as a marine in his early 20's. As Dubus was assisting the passengers in the broken down car, another car came hurtling out of the night straight toward the woman he was helping. Dubus jumped into the path of the oncoming car and pushed the woman out of the way, saving her life.

As a result, Dubus was critically injured and his legs were crushed. After several unsuccessful operations, his left leg was amputated and he lost the use of his right leg. Dubus was confined to a wheelchair and suffered painful infections the rest of his life, all the while battling clinical depression. He died about 10 years later.

Obviously, Dubus would never have chosen to experience what he experienced. Nonetheless, this is what he wrote about his life after the accident. *“Living in the world as a cripple allows you to see more clearly the crippled hearts of some people whose bodies are whole and sound. All of us, from time to time, suffer this crippling. Some suffer it daily and nightly.”* Even before he was wheelchair bound, Dubus was known for his ability to write deeply about people's pain and weakness. Yet, living as a cripple allowed him to penetrate to an even deeper place – the unveiling of humanity's crippled heart.

In our lesson from Hebrew's this Good Friday, we read, *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”* When God became a man in Jesus Christ, God became... well, a man. Christians believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man, not half God and half man, as Ricky Gervais mistakenly claims in his recent rant against Christianity. Although he did not sin as we sin, Jesus was fully and completely human, prone to all the tests and temptations of human life.

Often we emphasize His fully God part – His miracles, His healings, His exorcisms, His salvation of the world through his death and resurrection. And we are right to emphasize Jesus as fully God; if He were just a man who set a good example for all of us to live up to, then I for one, am in big trouble. Just showing me an example to follow assumes that I have the power, drive, freedom and will to live up to that example.

If it were only that easy! But, my own reality shows me that my will is compromised by my anger or lust or selfishness. My freedom is severely restricted by my penchant to, as St. Paul says in Romans, “do the things that I do not want to do.” This is the great insight of Step One of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 steps: *I am powerless over alcohol and my life has become unmanageable.* This is an insight lifted directly from the bible, not to mention life experience, and an insight that has universal applicability.

Obviously everyone is not powerless over alcohol, but everyone is powerless over something. I read the other day that men manage to have carnal thoughts, as it were, every 7 to 8 seconds. If you want to know what you are powerless over, just ask

somebody who is close to you. You'll be surprised to know that the thing you thought you had kept secret is fairly obvious to everyone else.

The blanket, one size fits all description for each of us is that we are all powerless over sin. This should come as no surprise, especially during the season of Lent. We just prayed in our collect a few Sundays ago, "*Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners,*" and the week before that, "*Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.*" I must confess that I'm amazed at the number of people who come to church week in and week out who believe that "God helps those who help themselves" is somewhere in the Bible.

Therefore, as we often say around here, we do not need a life coach – we need a Savior. There is no doubt that God became a man in order to save our lives, pushing us out of the way of the oncoming curse of death, absorbing the blow for our sake and in our place. And He lost more than a leg. That is the primary point of Good Friday, after all. That God that Jesus was fully God.

Having said that, I really don't want to overlook the one who was also fully human. Jesus clearly felt the fully human pain and despair of Good Friday. Dave Johnson preached an excellent Palm Sunday sermon on the forsakenness of Jesus on the cross. Jesus wasn't play-acting, he didn't cry out "My God My God, why have you forsaken me!" as an object lesson for us. He was human, fully. And therefore he felt the fully human experience of despair and forsakenness. He entered into your crippled human heart by way of his own heart.

Nor do I think that the fully human man, hanging on the cross, bleeding, suffocating, despairing was thinking tidy theological thoughts about transacting the forgiveness of our sins through the substitutionary atonement, as we like to call what happened on Good Friday. Jesus just died. The man was just executed between two criminals.

And I would even imagine, that although Jesus had clearly foretold his resurrection from the dead, the on the cross, the fully human man was thinking that this promise to rise from the dead was wishful thinking at best, and a cruel hoax at worse. Don't you think that sometimes? Then why wouldn't the one who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, the fully human man think that too? Why else would He cry out "why have you forsaken me?" Someone who has got an Easter Day Ace up his sleeve doesn't feel forsaken. Jesus didn't even have sleeves; it is likely that he was crucified naked.

The result of this terrible thing that happened to this fully human man, is that you and I have somebody who understands us. Again, I don't think, Jesus was thinking – now I will see more clearly the crippled hearts of men and women. I think he was hurting, and despairing and suffering, just exactly like the criminal on his right and the criminal on his left. But, since He was, in fact, crippled by despair, He does understand and "sympathize with your weaknesses," not to mention your own crippled heart. And that is the reason that you, right now, in your powerlessness over your own sin, may "*approach the throne*

*of grace with boldness, so that you can receive mercy and find grace to help in your time of need.”*

Amen.