

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Isaiah 50:5-9 / Mark 8:27-35)  
12.09.2021

In today's Gospel passage we are told that Jesus foretold that He would suffer at the hands of sinful men. We read: Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously.

The text goes on to tell us: Peter began to remonstrate with Him. Clearly, the apostle found it hard to accept that Christ would suffer. Indeed, Peter appears to have found the idea of Jesus suffering totally repulsive. I suspect many of us would have aligned ourselves with Peter had we found ourselves in his shoes. The tendency of the vast majority of people is to prefer to shun suffering... and even deny its possibility! Not only Christ's suffering, but also that of others... and their own!

Whatever people's reticence around consenting to suffering, the reality is that suffering and pain are part of every person's life. When Jesus told His disciples that His ministry would lead to suffering and death He was sharing with them a very basic truth concerning everyone. There is no life devoid of suffering. There is no living being who will not one day encounter death. Suffering is part of the lot of every member of the human race – including those engaged in the way of Christian discipleship. To be a committed Christian disciple is not to hold in hand an insurance policy against the experience of pain and suffering in life – even though some Christians may sometimes be tempted to think that is how it should be! Lest there be any mistake on our part, Jesus makes it abundantly clear when He speaks to His disciples that living in fellowship with Him, being His disciple, entails taking up one's cross and walking in the way He has traced before us. One cannot avoid one day or other having to walk the Via Dolorosa. If this is the way Jesus had to walk, it is the way those whom He calls to follow Him must travel as they make their way through life in His footsteps. The New Testament writers leave us in no doubt about this when they declare such things as this: Christ suffered for us leaving us an example that we may walk in His steps. The Scriptures in both Testaments speak of the inevitability of suffering in our lives. In his Rule for Monks, St Benedict speaks along the same lines. He writes in the Rule: When the monk meets with suffering. Note that he doesn't say: If the monk meets with suffering, but when. This implies that for Benedict there is no way that us monks will ever get through our monastic life without encountering suffering at some stage. Neither the Sacred Scriptures nor the Rule of St Benedict advocate that we court suffering, however. They just tell us that we will meet with it and when we do the only thing we can do is to endure it. But, I venture to say that even more than this is required of us. I dare to say that what is asked of us is not just to endure suffering, but even to embrace it! Is this not what is signified by that liturgical gesture the Church invites us to pose every Good Friday when we advance from our places to venerate the cross?

What I see to be the real question flagged up for us by what Jesus declared in this morning's Gospel passage is how we are meant to situate ourselves when suffering comes our way; how to situate ourselves before the Lord when we are led to traverse suffering as part of our human journey. It seems to me this question really does lie at the heart of the Scriptural texts heard on this Sunday. What we should draw forth from God's word this morning is wisdom in regard to how to cope with our sufferings in our lives which we are striving to live with and in Christ.

It seems to me that now is an appropriate moment to turn to and bring into focus the insights given to us by the prophet Isaiah in regard to suffering. (We heard Isaiah speak to us in our first reading this morning.)

Isaiah encourages us to see God as our helper in hours of trial and of need.

The psalmist echoes this thought often in the Psalter. He has many lines along the very same thought pattern as the prophet.

Isaiah encourages us to persevere in difficulties, daring to believe that God is close to us when we suffer. The prophet speaks of God as our Vindicator: the One who defends us and protects us from the assaults that come our way. He speaks of the Lord as the One who gains the victory for us over evil, sin and death; as the One who accomplishes redemption deep within us – working upon our hearts to liberate and console them.

All that being said, it is clear that for Isaiah suffering is not something to be sought out or created by oneself. Suffering is as an enemy to be defeated – but an enemy that can only be overcome if we dare to engage with it. We are asked to combat the enemy – relying not on our own strength alone, but in the power of God's grace at work within us.

Furthermore, Isaiah tells us that what is asked of us in times of trial is to take refuge in the Lord; to cling to Him; to find shelter in Him; to hide in the cleft of the rock... remembering that for us Christians the rock in whom we hide is Christ Himself!

All that to say that the best way for us to get through suffering is to remain close to Jesus, following the path He has traced and trodden before us.

Jesus' path did not end in suffering and death, of course. The way Christ walked led Him beyond these stark realities. Jesus was led further still than Calvary and the tomb. He was led into resurrection life. This is the end to which we journey with and in Christ.

We are called to life. Jesus came into the world that we might have life in abundance, life to the full! With and in Christ, we are all of us called to enjoy a fuller and better life.

The Lord's basic desire for us is to see us grow more and more in Him. (We find that expression used in the Rule of St Benedict.) In a strange and paradoxical way the most painful passages of our lives can be precisely what contribute most to our growth. Suffering can bring us further still. It can be used to be what was needed to lead us to live our lives conformed to Christ... one with Christ, one in Christ. There is a line of Scripture which reads: Christ is with us when we suffer. That implies that we are in communion with Christ in a privileged way when we suffer – whether or not we realise this to be the case. Mysteriously, suffering leads us to our being united with the Lord. Suffering and pain can be – and ultimately death itself will be – what leads us to become one with Jesus; more and more like Christ (Christlike); conformed to the Lord... with all that the word conformed implies: formed with Jesus; shaped into Christ.

That being said, suffering is seen by the Judeo-Christian tradition in which we are situated as the destructive result of sin. So, once again, a word of caution against creating sufferings for ourselves. This is certainly not what the Lord asks of us.

That Christ came into the world and that He suffered as He did – for us sinful creatures – does not mean that the effects of sin are no longer felt by wounded humanity. They clearly are! But we dare nonetheless to confess our faith and hope in Christ's victory over suffering, sin and death – and this even as we continue to suffer as we pursue the Christian path.

If we preach a crucified Christ (as Paul says we do) we also proclaim a Risen Lord: a Risen Lord who carries the wounds of the suffering He endured for us in His Sacred Passion.

It is significant that the scars of Christ's suffering are still visible even in His Risen and glorified body. The visibility of these wounds reminds us of all that Christ endured in His body; they recall to us all that Jesus bore for us in His flesh. That the Glorified Christ was recognisable in His resurrection appearances precisely because of the wounds He bore in His flesh, shows us that what Jesus underwent in His Sacred Passion was not wiped out forever, to be forgotten when He rose again from the dead. Christ's scars were to remain the signs of His love for our wounded humanity.

Again and again the New Testament writers will make the point that the whole of the Paschal Mystery of Christ has to be held together. This is underlined for us in Jesus' discussion with the Emmaus disciples – as they walked along the road, trying to make sense out of Jesus' suffering, not succeeding in doing so until Christ Himself came and walked with them, opening up for them the full meaning of the Scriptures. The Emmaus disciples were challenged by the Risen Lord Himself to believe that it was necessary for Him to suffer so as to enter into His glory. That same challenge is addressed to us. We are challenged by Christ to come to the point where we see suffering and death as the necessary passage into life. Jesus' bottom line could be said to amount to this: No cross, no resurrection! No pain, no gain! No death, no birth to new life! Jesus made it clear to Cleopas and his companion that the Son of Man had to suffer in order to overcome the destructive power of sin which holds humanity in its grip.

The implications of Jesus' teaching in the Emmaus Gospel are far-reaching for us. What the Risen Lord shared with the disciples as He walked along the road with them on the evening of His resurrection brings home to all of us that we are called to share in Christ's sufferings so as to be able to share His risen life with Him.

There is no other way to deal with suffering than to go through it! That should put us on our guard against the temptation to continually avoid pain. As I said a moment ago: no pain, no gain! How much energy we put into numbing, deadening or fleeing pain, rather than daring to feel it so as to be able to let go of it. Tough times, trials, suffering endured with Christ, contribute to our growth – which ultimately means that they contribute to Christ's coming to maturity within us. As we endure whatever befalls us along the way, relying on the Lord's strength and His steadfast love, our relationship with Him deepens... until we come to the point that Paul arrived at when he declared: I live no long myself alone, but Christ lives in me.

Given all we have seen this morning, when our pain is deep and our suffering is acute, let us draw comfort from Jesus' words and example. Let us do as Christ bids us. Let us take up our cross and follow Him, daring to endure the ills that befall us as He endured His: with character and perseverance, imbued with that holy hope which Paul assures us will not disappoint us, because of God's love which has been and is forever being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us. (Cf. Romans 5)

What Jesus means when He asks us to take up our cross and follow Him is that we keep our eyes fixed upon Him as we journey life's arduous paths and difficult roads. By the words He spoke to the Emmaus disciples, the Lord not only encouraged them, but encourages us, to recognise and embrace the unique suffering that is part of our lot daring to believe, really trusting, that the way to salvation lies therein.

The late Henri Nouwen wrote: Taking up your cross means, first of all, befriending your wounds and letting them reveal to you your own truth. I emphasise the words: your wounds... your own truth.

I think what Nouwen implies by those words is that there is a suffering that each one of us feels in the unique way – a suffering rooted in the specific story that is ours... and which has

to be accepted as such. It is only when we feel this pain, only when we discover what it is deep within us, what exactly within us, that stands in need of the Lord's healing touch, that we are able to find release from it.

There is within you and me a source of suffering and of pain that is specifically ours – a source of suffering and of pain that Jesus calls our cross, reminding us that it is well and truly our cross... not someone else's but our very own! It is this that has to be taken up and carried... carried to that place where we will eventually be able to lay it down and in so doing find relief from its effects upon us.

One day, by the help of God's grace, we will be led to experience liberation, joy and peace. New life will be given to us. New life which is nothing other than a share in Christ's own risen life.

As Benedict puts it in the Rule: Having persevered, having shared in Christ's sufferings unto death, we will be led all together to share in the glory of His resurrection.

Amen!