

Sunday, February 8, 2015

5th Sunday of the Year (B)

Conventual Mass

Suffering with Christ

Suffering, especially the undeserved suffering of the innocent is one of the most distressing problems that face human beings. There are no simplistic and definite answers. For many, it brings them to a denial of God. For a believer, it is more difficult, as it has to do directly with God.¹

Suffering touches each one of us; it is part of the human condition: sickness, loss, and death. Then there are the even more horrific examples: the suffering caused by natural disasters and the intrigues of evil human beings which result in such atrocities as the holocaust or those perpetrated by ISIS today. We all have had to come to grips with the question that Job asks when confronted by our suffering, the sufferings of our loved ones and in the world in general. Where is a just and merciful God in all this?

Job, a rich and just man, is overwhelmed by one catastrophe after another. God has allowed Satan (the “tempter”, not yet the devil) to test Job, an upright man, faithful to God. Job, unaware of the agreement, loses his children, all his possessions; he is stricken with a hideous disease and reduced to being a beggar. Friends visit Job and are quick to give the usual explanation: “Either God has punished you for your sins, or he has unjustly abandoned you. Job protests his innocence to his friends and is stung by God’s silence in the face of his incomprehensible suffering.ⁱⁱ

In the progress of the book, Job and his friends find no answer to the mystery. At the end, God reveals himself, the God to whom Job had pleaded his case. In this theophany, God does not take the trouble to defend himself, but affirms his wisdom as against the wisdom of human beings: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know “(Job 38:4-5). The world is full of the mystery of God’s

wisdom, in spite of its paradoxes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Book of Job does not offer a way to understand suffering and evil but a way to live with it. The experience of Job is that one can live with suffering and evil only when God is made manifest to us by an insight into the reality and mystery of God.^{iv}

God has manifested himself to us too: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1:1). The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. He entered space and time and suffering. He came like a lover seeking above all intimacy, presence and togetherness with us. Job was satisfied even though the God who appeared to him gave him absolutely no answer to all his questions. In Jesus God did the most important thing and gave the most important gift: himself. It is a lover’s gift. Out of our tears, our waiting, our aloneness, our weeping, and our cry, he came, right into that cry.^v

He is there with us. That is what matters. Are we broken?

He is broken with us. Are we rejected? He was “despised and rejected of men.” Do we weep? Do we ever say, “Oh, no, not again! I can’t take it anymore!” “He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Is our love betrayed? He too loved and was betrayed by the ones he loved. Does it seem sometimes as if life has passed us by? He too was passed over by the world. His way of suffering-love is rejected; his own followers often the most guilty. ^{vi}

He descends into all our hells, even the hell of the death camps. He descends into the darkness of insanity, He finds or makes light even in the darkness of the mind. By his death and resurrection he has smashed open the darkest door of all, the one leading to the realm of death. It is not merely that he rose from the dead, but that he changed the meaning of death, and therefore of all the little deaths of suffering that precede death and make up part of it. ^{vii}

He came, he became one of us, he is here with us still. If he does not heal all our broken bones and whatever breaks us, he

comes into them and is broken with us. And he shows us that we can use our very brokenness to heal others. Since we are members of his body, united to him, we too can be broken with and for others for their healing. All our sufferings can therefore be transformed into his work. We are really his body. That is why Paul says: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church” (Col 1:24).^{viii}

God’s answer to suffering happened not only 2000 years ago, but continues to happen in our own lives. All our suffering can become part of his work, the greatest work ever done, the work of salvation, of helping to win the kingdom of eternal joy for others. This can be done only if we believe. Faith is not just a mental assent within us; it is a cooperation with him. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone...opens the door, I will come in and eat with him” (Rev 3:20). To believe, according to John’s gospel, is to receive what God has already done. Our part is to receive God’s work and let it work itself out in and through

our lives, including our tears. We offer it up and God really takes it, transforms it, and uses it in ways so powerful we would be astounded if we but knew them now.^{ix}

Suffering is Christ's invitation to follow him. Christ went to the cross and we are invited to follow him to the same cross. Not because it is the cross, but because it is his. Suffering is not the setting that explains the cross; the cross is the setting that explains suffering. True love is willing to suffer. St. Bernard of Clairvaux said that whenever he looked at a crucifix, Christ's five wounds appeared to him as lips saying, "I love you."^x

Because of the resurrection, when all our tears are wiped away, incredibly, we will look back at them and laugh, not in derision but in joy. We do a little of that even now when a great crisis has passed. It looks very different when we look back from when we saw it as future or present. The great St. Teresa of Avila who could always be counted on for just the right word said that from heaven the most miserable earthly life will look like one bad night spent in an inconvenient hotel. And may that God bring us

all together into that everlasting life where God “will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:2, 4).

i" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.5, Ordinary Time, Year B (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1993) 43

ii" Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (N.Y., Paulist Press, 1994) 141

iii" John L. McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee, Bruce, 1965) 441

iv" McKenzie, 442

v" <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/suffering.htm> 1,2

vi" <http://www.peterkreeft.com//topics/suffering.htm> 2

vii" <http://www.peterkreeft.com//topics/suffering.htm> 2,3

viii" <http://www.peterkreeft.com//topics/suffering.htm> 3

ix" <http://www.peterkreeft.com//topics/suffering.htm> 4

x" <http://www.peterkreeft.com//topics/suffering.htm> 4