

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

I have taken the cue for this reflection from the exceptionally beautiful prayer of today's Mass 'Father in heaven, the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross that his brothers and sisters might glory in new life. Change our selfishness into self-giving. Help us to embrace the world you have given us that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life and joy of Easter.'

Our period of preparation for Easter is fast drawing to a close. We are soon to enter Holy Week in which we contemplate Jesus, his arms outstretched on the cross, embracing our world. There is much darkness and pain in our world. The Church invites us to be disciples of Jesus and embrace the world with him, for it is only the love of God which we see revealed in Jesus that has the power to transform our suffering. Jesus shares it with us and takes us through it to the joy of his resurrection.

There is a lot of suffering in our lives and too much of it in the world around us – physical suffering, suffering of the heart and suffering of the mind. When suffering comes upon us it is often accompanied by bewilderment. None of us finds it easy to cope. If we fail to find any meaning at all in it we can be tempted to despair. So the question I wish to ask in this homily is: Does our experience of Jesus help give some meaning to suffering that can enable us to bear it, and perhaps be of some help to others in their pain and confusion?

Jesus certainly suffered. His physical sufferings are familiar to us all, including the terrible suffering of crucifixion. We can imagine how much he suffered in his heart. People failed to believe him when he revealed to them a God of love. He was rejected. He was also betrayed, denied and abandoned even by those in the inner circle of his chosen friends. We have some insight into his mental anguish when we reflect on his prayer in the agony and on the cross.

Firstly, let us examine some of the common misunderstandings that people have when they think of suffering and its relation to God's will. Some think that God is using suffering to punish us for something which we have done wrong. It is obviously true that we do bring a lot of suffering upon ourselves by our sinful behaviour, but the fact that Jesus was innocent should alert us to the fact that there is no necessary connection between suffering and guilt. Furthermore we should see the crucifixion of Jesus for what it was: a sinful decision made by people acting against the will of God. They were not carrying out God's will. They were resisting it. The crucifixion was not God punishing Jesus, but people acting badly. As Jesus himself said: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word' (John 8:37).

We tend to jump to the conclusion that it is somehow God's will that we should be suffering in the way we are. It is true that God created a world that is in process: earthquakes, monsoons and many natural disasters are inevitably part of this process. If people are caught up in them, they suffer. But we should not be thinking of God as willing this or that particular disaster.

It is true that God created people free to be able to say No to love, and, when we do, we and others suffer. But we should not think of God as willing the kinds of sinful behaviour that bring so much suffering on our world. When we or others are suffering because of the sin perpetrated by those who obstinately reject grace and act sinfully, we should not think of the consequent

suffering as being in any way God's will. As we watch Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, we are right to imagine God weeping over the world.

We are not saying that God is a victim of our cruelty, or that God stands by helpless. No, God is present with his grace inspiring everyone to stop doing evil and to do good. Just imagine how beautiful this world would be if everyone were as loving, obedient and innocent as Jesus. Even when we sin, God is present to us and to the victims of our sin, pouring out his grace upon us so that we will find healing and reconciliation. If people fail to heed God's grace and persist in inflicting suffering on us, God will still take us, as he took his Son, through death into the embrace of the resurrection.

When we are suffering let us think of God as present to us, loving us. Instead of thinking of God as the cause and trying to work out why, let us look to God, knowing that God is there pouring out grace upon us and leading us close to his heart through it. If we look for the grace we will see it and that will help us bear the pain.

Let us now reflect on some of the fruits of suffering – some of the exquisite and delicate flowers that grow only in the garden of suffering. In the Second Reading we are told that Jesus himself learned to obey through suffering. It can be the same for us. Jesus would have always been in touch with his heart, but we cannot say the same of ourselves. When we are strong, when we are successful, when we are managing well, we can be distracted and we can forget how totally dependent we are on God, the source of our life. Suffering can force us to face and accept our frailty and dependence. It can cast us back into the arms of God.

When, through a miracle of grace, we find ourselves coping with pain and disappointment, we can come to a deeper faith. We can come to realize with Saint Paul that 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:31-39). Suffering can force us to listen to our hearts which otherwise can get lost under all the distraction and busyness. The Japanese have two characters to express the idea of being too busy. One is the character for heart. The other is the character for destruction. When we are too busy, we are destroying our heart. When we suffer, our heart is in pain, but at least we are in touch with it. And in listening to our hearts we may hear God speaking to us and learn to obey him. Do you find that when you are suffering you are the most real, the most in touch?

Besides deepening our faith, suffering can lead us to hope. Recognizing our own weakness, we look to God for strength and we experience a courage that we recognize as a gift. It is not something we drum up from our own resources. It is the strength of Christ upholding us. We also find ourselves longing for that fullness of communion with God that we call 'heaven' when 'every tear will be wiped away' (Revelation 1:17; 21:4).

Suffering can break our heart, but we can find that in the breaking our heart is forced open. We become more sensitive to the pain of others as we experience something of the compassion of the Heart of Jesus. Just as a seed pod has to break open so that the seeds can germinate in the soil, so when our hearts are broken we experience a depth of love for others that we never knew we had.

One final point. In today's Gospel, Jesus says: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw

everyone to myself.' It is especially when we are suffering that we find ourselves attracted to the suffering Jesus. It is especially when our heart is pierced that we are able to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). Furthermore, as Paul reminds us, when we grow in love through suffering, we can be God's instruments in drawing other people to grace: 'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'(Colossians 1:24).

Saint Therese of Lisieux gives expression to this truth in a verse she penned about her longings before the tabernacle: 'I'd like to burn away, to be consumed – near God by day and night; a steady glow of mystery, a sanctuary lamp, alight. What happiness is mine: I've flame within me! – Daily thus can I win Jesus souls, and by the same Heart's fire He came to light them by.'

I do not want to pretend that we can understand suffering. It remains beyond our comprehension. However, let us learn from Jesus to place our trust in God. He does not want us to suffer, and he always draws close to us when we are in pain. God is not the one willing the suffering, but the one loving us in it. As we watch and admire Jesus on the cross, let us unite our suffering to his and allow him to come to us and bear our pain with us. He will teach us to grow in love through it, and he will embrace in a special way those who suffer with him and allow the suffering to refine their souls and purify their love.