

22nd Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

There is a tension in the readings for today's Mass. The Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 63) is one of the most beautiful psalms in the Bible. It expresses our deep longing to be with God and our confidence that God is holding us close and protecting us from all harm. Jeremiah speaks of the fire burning in his heart, which he finds impossible to restrain, and in the Gospel Jesus speaks of the importance of life. At the same time, the readings remind us that if we are going to live we have to learn how to deal with suffering. Jeremiah complains that God has tricked him, for when he speaks the truth, people don't want to hear it and they mock him, and Jesus speaks of the place of the cross in his life and in the life of his followers. We will never learn to live to the full unless we learn to face suffering in trust, for it is part of every person's experience. Jesus promises to be with us, but we must learn to take up our cross and follow him.

One thing suffering can do is force us to face up to the truth of our dependence – on others, but especially on God. This is something that we can forget when everything is going well.

A second consideration is that when we suffer we are forced to engage psychic energy to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body. We are forced to take stock of our lives and if we are wasting them or living a distracting existence, suffering can help focus us on what really matters.

Thirdly, we are reminded that every new life comes after a dying. Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings': the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes and dreams and expectations. Each time we accept to 'die' we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy with him.

We look at Jesus and see how he suffered: with faith and hope and love and forgiveness and care. If we can learn to accept suffering the way he did we will experience a gradual purifying of our heart as we let go our pride, our ego, our self-satisfaction, and the distractions and superficiality of our lives.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we are to love the outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we are going to take the

part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul's experience. However he wanted to suffer with Jesus (Galatians 2:19-20; Galatians 6:14; Romans 6:5; 8:17-18). Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Paul to find joy in his sufferings (Colossians 1:24; see 1Peter 4:13).

Finally, there are certain flowers that grow only in the garden of suffering: flowers of compassion, of patience, of wisdom, of the kind of love that comes only from a broken heart. There are also certain special strengths that are experienced only by those who suffer. Paul writes: 'The Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (2Corinthians 12:9-10).

It seems true that to experience Christ as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies. The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering that is borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul (Philippians 1:29) and James (1:2) consider such suffering a privilege. There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer. Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection (2Peter 3:13; Philippians 3:10, 20-21; 2Corinthians 4:6 - 5:10). We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately this will happen when we share his glory with his Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here

on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love.

If, while working against suffering, we find that there is suffering that we cannot avoid, let us, like Simon of Cyrene, share the cross with Jesus. Let us embrace the one who gave his life for us on the cross. Then we will experience the amazing grace that he is embracing us.

I conclude with the dying prayer of Yogananda, a Hindu devotee of Jesus. As his body was wasting away, he held to the faith that his body was a temple of God's Spirit and he prayed to Jesus: 'In your temple, by your own hand, light the lamp of your love. Turn my darkness into light. Turn my darkness into light.'