

## 29<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (October 17, 2021)

Here we are in the middle of October, and yet all three of our readings today sound a whole lot more like the Holy Week and Good Friday we observed six months ago and that we will again observe six months from now:

- Isaiah in the first reading prophesies about the Suffering Servant who would be crushed in infirmity and suffering and give his life as an offering for sin. In fact, these verses are from a longer passage from Isaiah that is always the first reading for the Good Friday liturgy;
- the author of Hebrews in our second reading reminds us that Jesus understands our weaknesses because he was tested and tempted in every way that we are, especially in his suffering and death;
- and Jesus in the gospel tells James and John, who were jockeying for places of honor in the kingdom, that they would drink from Jesus' cup and be baptized in his baptism...but they didn't have a clue that he was speaking of the cup and baptism of his suffering and death.

In other words, we are confronted once again with the mystery of the Cross: Jesus' own cross, of course, and those crosses that life presents to all of us at various times and in various ways and degrees. On one hand, we know for a fact that we live in a broken, imperfect world—which means we cannot completely avoid suffering and loss. We don't have to like it and we certainly do not and should not seek it out for its own sake. But when it does come, especially when it comes unexpectedly and completely out of the blue, we are stung by the starkness of its pain; it's very easy to feel fear and anger and frustration: “God, why are you doing this to me? Where are you; are you even there at all??”

Such feelings and fears and frustrations are not by themselves wrong or sin or scandal; they are simply a consequence of the fact that in our human nature we do not and indeed cannot see the whole picture. Remember that even Jesus himself experienced that on the Cross when he cried out “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” So he knows what we go through in our suffering, he knows every ounce of it...because he went through it as well, and way beyond what we do. Again from the second reading: “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way”. That is a major gift to us and a huge consolation—one that we would do well to call to mind when we are again face-to-face with our own crosses.

So is there any point to all this? Is there any meaning or good that comes through our suffering, or are the unbelievers and atheists right in saying that if God exists, he would not allow us to suffer--but we do in fact suffer; therefore, God does not exist? Yes, of course goodness and grace can and does come through suffering...and Jesus of course is the first and strongest demonstration of that truth. His awful suffering, his feeling abandoned by God and his death was followed by his rising from the dead. Jesus' resurrection not only means that the darkness of death will never again touch him, but it also means that we are able to share in that eternal glory and joy of his. No greater gift is possible to imagine, and we can't even imagine what it will be. As St. Paul said in one of my very favorite Scripture verses: “Eye has not seen, ear has not

heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

This is all in fact true, and it is the foundation of our faith. But we can imagine someone responding: “yeah, sounds great, but I’m hurting bad right now and I don’t see any of that heavenly glory right now. How do I know that it’s not all just some ‘pie-in-the-sky’ myth like my non-believing friends say it is?” Can good come out of suffering in ways that we can see or experience? Yes, it can—maybe not always immediately or according to our preferred time frame, but it can...and does. Last month we heard Sue Sweeney talk about her second cousin Blessed Stanley Rother, an Oklahoma priest. He was killed in the Guatemala missions in 1981 because he would not stop criticizing the injustices committed by the rich and powerful against his poor parishioners. His death, like the deaths of so many other martyrs throughout the history of the Church, has led to a deepened and revitalized faith; in this case, both in his home state of Oklahoma and in the missions he served in Guatemala. One specific example: the parish that Blessed Stanley served in Guatemala had been around for 400+ years; in that whole time, none of its native sons was ever ordained to the priesthood—not a single one in over 400 years. Within a few years of his murder in 1981, however, that radically changed. At least 8-10 young men from that one parish have been ordained to the priesthood and a number of others have and are following the same path. I assure you: that is no mere coincidence! The ancient saying is so true and is proved here once again: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

One other example I’d like to share is a whole lot more personal. I’ve told you before about the ‘crisis of faith’ I experienced back in 1984 before I began my seminary studies; to summarize very briefly, some reading I had done led me through several weeks and months of wondering if Jesus really did exist or if he was just a made-up story. Not exactly the strongest foundation from which to begin seminary studies, let me tell you... Anyway, by the grace of God and the love and prayers of family and friends I got through that very difficult time. And did anything good come out of that awful experience for me? It sure did. First, it helped me realize like nothing else could how utterly dependent I was on the grace and mercy of God; I was not totally self-sufficient like I had thought or presumed. That was a tough dose of realism, but one that I really needed. Secondly, going through that darkness of doubt has helped me countless times throughout my priesthood—whether in the confessional or in conversations with others going through very difficult times of their own. Having felt helpless and powerless myself, I can understand at least a bit more what others experiencing such things go through. That has been very important, and certainly a major grace and blessing from God.

We don’t have to enjoy suffering, nor do we have to pursue it for its own sake. In fact, we should not do so; God doesn’t call us to be masochists. But suffering can and does, by the very mysterious but very real providence of God, lead to good and grace and healing in ways we could not possibly imagine. It might be a fruitful exercise on occasion for each of us to think about a hard time we had to go through, remember what we learned or realized through that experience, and how it has actually been a blessing. All such wisdom, all such blessing comes from God who can and does bring unexpected good out of the worst circumstances. Never forget that Jesus knows exactly what we endure because he endured it all himself. That reminder allows us, in the words of the second reading, to “confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.”