

16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (July 17, 2022)

Every once in a while we hear or read a passage from the Bible that can leave us scratching our heads and wondering: “huh?? What is that all about??” Think, for example, of Jesus’ words in the sixth chapter of John’s gospel: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, you have no life in you”. We know that Jesus is talking about the Eucharist here, but still—those are some very startling words.

St. Paul gives us another stunner in today’s reading from his letter to the Colossians: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church”. “I rejoice in my sufferings”: was Paul a masochist who enjoyed pain for its own sake? Did he maybe need a little bit of therapy? And then he speaks about “filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ”: is he really saying that what Jesus suffered on the cross wasn’t enough to accomplish our redemption? What could Paul possibly add to what Jesus did and endured? Is Paul committing blasphemy by equating himself to Jesus??

No—Paul has not gone off the deep end; he has not committed blasphemy. Rather, he is helping us approach a basic truth about the mystery, the reality of suffering—perhaps the most challenging and scandalizing reality in the daily life and struggle of faith. The atheists love to point to the reality of suffering as their certain proof that there is no God. Their argument: if there is a God who is loving and merciful as you believers say, then he would certainly not allow the suffering of so many innocent people. And when we think about the victims of recent shootings and other violent attacks, or our own loved ones suffering from a painful or terminal illness, we maybe grapple with that ‘why?’ question ourselves.

How do we come to grips with the reality of this mystery of suffering? Can we do so at all? First, we need to affirm that suffering, in and of itself, is not good. Who in their right mind would want or enjoy the pain of illness, a broken relationship, the death of a loved one, or any other such thing for its own sake? Let’s remember that Jesus himself, the night before he died, prayed in his agony in the garden that his heavenly Father would allow the cup of suffering he would endure the next day to pass him by. He was no masochist who looked forward to the horrific pain of being nailed to a piece of wood the next day.

But then we need to ask: can any good come out of suffering? That’s a very different question...to which the answer is a firm ‘yes’. Our own suffering can make us more aware of and sensitive to the suffering of others, and we can be present to them in ways that would otherwise be impossible. I’ve told you before about the time before I started my seminary studies when I struggled with severe doubts against faith and God. That was by far the most painful time in my life, but it helped me immeasurably in at least two major ways: 1) it reminded me that I am totally dependent on the grace of God, and 2) it has helped me in visiting with so many people over the years who also, for various reasons, struggled with faith. There is nothing like walking the proverbial mile in someone else’s shoes to help you be truly present and caring to someone who is hurting.

The best example of the good that can come from suffering, of course, is Jesus Christ himself—he whose suffering and death on the cross, which pain he freely took on himself, accomplished our redemption and gives us the hope for eternal life and joy beyond the mind's power to imagine. Why did it happen this way? Did it have to happen this way? I don't know, nor do you or anyone else know—we are in the realm of mystery once again. Peter Kreeft said it so well as he so often does: “Suffering redeems. We do not know how, but it does. We do not know why this is God's policy, but we know that it is. God's word tell us so.”

So we come back to St. Paul's words about ‘filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ’. Not only was Jesus' suffering the cause of our redemption, but our own suffering--in a very mysterious but a very real way—can also work toward redemption when united with Jesus' suffering. This is the basis for that traditional and still valid notion of ‘offering up’ our sufferings to God in union with the sufferings of his co-eternal Son. St. John Paul II, in his 1984 letter on suffering, affirmed clearly that no one can add to Christ's perfect gift of himself to us on the cross. But since Christ is the head of the body, the Church, to which we belong and through who we are one with Christ, our own suffering can be united with that of Jesus and to all other love that is expressed and given through human suffering.

Again, we are certainly at the level of mystery here, but that doesn't make this any less true. What's more, the fact that our suffering offered to God in union with that of Christ, is tremendously liberating. It gives meaning and even worth to something—our suffering—that would be otherwise meaningless and worthless. Suffering is real; we can't pretend it doesn't exist. It isn't good in itself; God doesn't want us to become masochists who pursue pain for its own sake. It is most definitely not punishment from God. We have to admit that sometimes our suffering is the result of our own foolish actions or decisions...in which case we have only ourselves to blame.

But the suffering that is not the result of our own frailty and sin? That's where St. Paul's words come into play. St. Teresa of Calcutta has some powerful advice for us: “Suffering is not a punishment...Never let one drop of suffering go to waste. Give it to Jesus. Give it all for the love of Jesus. Let him use it in the redemption of the world.” Is this more crazy talk that makes no sense at all? Only if St. Paul was crazy because her words were simply a restatement of Paul's words to the Colossians. Only if love and self-sacrifice for others is crazy. Only if wanting everyone to share in the joy of the eternal and immediate presence of God is crazy.

Suffering is mystery. When we have to come to grips with it ourselves, we may well struggle mightily...and that's no surprise, because it is mystery. When that happens, let's turn our suffering over to the One who does know what to do with it—the One who experienced suffering more than we or anyone else can or will ever know when he hung upon that cross nearly 2000 years ago.