

5th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (February 4, 2024)

In the first reading we hear from the classic treatment of pain and suffering in all world literature—the Old Testament book of Job. We don't know for sure who wrote it or when or where, but it confronts that age-old question: 'why do bad things happen to good people?' Job is presented as a man who appears to have it all—material wealth, a strong marriage and family life, good health, and a deep faith in God. Then he suffers a series of calamities that take away all those blessings. The bulk of this book is a series of reflections by Job and also by his friends who offer their support but who also try to tell him that his sufferings must be the result of his own sins.

Today's reading comes from Job's first reply to his friends in which he speaks of his misery and on the futility of life: "is not man's life on earth a drudgery?...My days...come to an end without hope...I shall not see happiness again." Certainly not a cheery message, but then again Job had suffered one major heartbreaking loss after another...something most of us have endured as well. We try to live a good, honest life; we love the Lord and seek to follow him, to love neighbor as self...and what can happen? We might lose our job, or be struck by a tornado or other natural disaster, or receive a serious diagnosis, or experience the pain of a broken marriage or family situation, or the unexpected death of a loved one.

We endure these things, we know that garbage happens (you have probably seen the bumper sticker that puts it in much more graphic language...). We don't know why these things happen, and we can't help but ask "why??" Job's story is often our story, his words ring true: "My days come to an end without hope." So what do we do in such circumstances? Is there such a thing as hope in what clearly seems to be a hopeless situation? Yes, there is. But we need to remember what real hope is. The Catechism calls it the virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven above all, trusting in Jesus' promises and relying on the Holy Spirit's grace. True hope is necessarily God-focused, looking to him for all needed grace and strength and not to ourselves.

That is an especially important truth for us who live in this country that puts great value on personal initiative and a strong work ethic. There is great value and importance in that ethic, and it is a blessing to enjoy the fruits of our labor. But we can be tempted to apply that mentality to the spiritual life: 'If I obey the commandments, do the right things and avoid sin, then all should go well for me and I shouldn't have to suffer.' Fr. Benedict Groeschel used to illustrate this idea by saying "if I do something nice for God, then God will do something nice for me"—almost like entering into a contract with God: 'if I do A for God, then God will do B for me.' Of course, neither life nor the spiritual life in particular fits in such a neat and tidy box for us, does it?

Still we wonder when suffering comes along: "why did God do this to me? What did I do wrong?" Sometimes we have to admit that we are the cause of our own suffering—we do something careless or not terribly bright, and we have no one to blame but ourselves. But that is certainly not always the case. And that is where we have to come back to genuine, authentic hope—that which is founded on God and on his grace, mercy and love that we need from him. God gives us the grace to love him and to live the gospel life to which Jesus calls us. Loving and living that way will not keep us from suffering; Jesus was more than clear about that as well. But it will help us remember the basic reality that we need to be saved, that God is the one who saves, and that we cannot save ourselves. Thanks be to God, Jesus has done the work of reopening the gates of heaven for us through his own suffering, death and resurrection.

In the meantime, we can't expect to have a full understanding of these mysteries in this life. We still suffer, we still ask and cry out "why??" I would encourage you not to be afraid of asking that question

from the depth of your heart and of your sadness or fear. Don't be scandalized when you struggle with those questions. You are in the best of company when you do so—Jesus himself cried out in genuine human pain and fear: “My God, why have you abandoned me?” But that's also when we ask for the grace to remember the reality and power of God's presence, love, and power, and of his desire to bring us his peace and to perfectly fulfill the hope he has placed in every one of us.

At the end of the book of Job, he expresses his newly restored faith and hope in saying to God: “I know that you can do all things...I have dealt with great things that I do not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know.” Another way of saying this: “God, I still don't get this suffering thing, but I don't have to. It's enough for me to know that you, Lord, are God and that I'm not, and that you can do it all, and that you will not abandon or forsake me.” Job came to know the gift and the joy of hope, and the joy of knowing his utter dependence on the mercy, grace, and love of God. May we desire and receive that same knowledge, that same hope, that same joy.