

Fifth Sunday of Easter, C – May 15, 2022 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 950 words

There are some things in this life that we would rather not learn about, and suffering is one such thing. Saints Paul and Barnabas preach to us today in the first reading: “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” This is what we might call an “hard truth” of the bible; one, in fact, which some preachers choose to ignore in their own teaching. I once read one commentary that claimed that suffering was meaningless; and I have seen my share of televangelists preaching to their audiences about health and wealth and with nary a mention of the cross. These sorts of messages only tempt us all the more to do what our fallen human nature already tends toward: to resist suffering; to flee from it; to try to rid our lives of it. Yet, if Paul and Barnabas preached about suffering’s being necessary in order to enter the Kingdom of God, then it has to be meaningful, and it has to be, in a certain sense, something good.

In an age that lacks faith, the first thing that many people tend to do when they encounter suffering is ask “why”. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does a good God allow bad things to happen at all? Why does he allow earthquakes to wreak devastation and tornadoes to destroy lives? Why do I have to deal with this particular suffering – whatever it might be – when I have been minding my own business and trying to lead a good life? Why me? On one level, there’s nothing wrong with these questions: we want to understand, and we should try to understand. But for someone who lacks faith, questions such as these – which can be quite difficult to answer – can end up becoming a sort of condition: “Unless I understand, I will not accept this suffering”. And there are some who take it a step further, and leave the Christian faith entirely, because they do not find the answers they desire.

The person with a strong faith, on the other hand, doesn’t concern himself so exclusively with the “why” questions: he knows that suffering is necessary. “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God”. And our Lord himself said, “Take up your cross and follow me”. That I or anyone else should have to suffer is obvious; therefore, the question is not primarily “why”, but “how”: How must I suffer? In seeking the answer to this question, we can look to the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our model, and imitate what she did. She bore so much pain and hardship but did so with courage, with perseverance, with confidence and trust in God; with patience, faith, hope, and love. And it’s not that she never asked “why” – St. Luke tells us twice that she pondered in her heart things that had happened, once after something joyful occurred, and once after a moment of desolation. She was constantly asking why, seeking to understand. But that quest for understanding was not the condition for her faith; rather, it was a function of her faith.

Everybody has to suffer, and not even the Mother of God was exempt. Her example gives us hope and strength to bear our own burdens and offer them to the Lord. She witnessed the greatest evil ever to take place on this earth – the crucifixion of the Son of God – and she felt deeply the pain of it all. But she kept her faith and hope in God, and now, in heaven, that pain is but a distant memory. Our second reading gives us a little window into the reality of heaven, as it tells us, “Behold, God’s dwelling is with [men]... He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.” This is truly a bible verse that we should memorize, so that we always have it at hand when we need it. Suffering is not easy: it pulls us down, it humiliates us, it darkens our vision; it can even leave us in confusion. In the midst of it all, we need a light off in the distance that we can fix our sights on: and what more beautiful and consoling light than the idea of being with God in happiness forever, while he himself wipes the tears from our brows.

This month of May is a time of special devotion to Our Lady. But even apart from special seasons of devotion, we should pray to her daily and ask her to obtain for us from God the things we need. Perhaps one of our greatest needs at this time is a deeper faith, so that we can see the sufferings in our lives as an opportunity to draw closer to God and enter into his Kingdom, rather than as a reason to question his goodness. Her faith never faltered; even as her Son hung on the cross, in seeming contradiction to all the promises of greatness that the Archangel Gabriel had made to her some 33 years before; yet she never once doubted God's goodness or his power to save. Her faith paid off, and her suffering is ended. God himself has dried her tears, and now she intercedes for us to help us along our way. We should turn to her in our every need. "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."