

[74] Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: *Job 7:1-4, 6-7 / Psalm 147 / 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23 / Mark 1:29-39*

Job speaks of life as “drudgery” or as a battle to survive. Like “hirelings” we must work to live and to put food on the table. This is not our true home and we are wayfarers in a foreign land. We are a “slave” to the mortal condition, longing for leisure and comfort from our toil. One might summarize his remarks thusly: life is hard and life is short. When he speaks about the lack of hope and that he “shall not see happiness again,” he is speaking about the fleeting joy or satisfaction this world offers. Job is not spurning God but he does indicate that there is something about the mystery of pain that remains unintelligible. Any of us who have endured loss or grown old or know sickness and pain can add our voices to the truth of what Job says. We get older and know that there are more days behind us than before us. We appreciate that our bodies fail us and there are some ailments from which we will not recover. Pain becomes the constant companion to many of us. While as Christians we trust that the Lord can restore all that the world takes away, the world will not let go of us until it has killed us.

The Book of Job is not a testament to despair, but rather is a witness of faith against the harsh truth of existence in the mortal world. I am reminded of St. Teresa of Avila and her appraisal as a Christian of hardship. She was on her way back to the convent during a torrential storm. She tumbles down an embankment into a pool of mud. Dragging herself out, she looks up to heaven with this address to the Almighty: “If this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder that you have so few of them!” Perpetually in conversation with God, her assessment is no affront to the deity, but is a tenacious expression of an existential truth in facing the mystery of suffering.

Visitors to his home attempt to convince Job that his dire plight must be a punishment for some crime or sin. The Jews saw this view as safeguarding God’s goodness and divine justice. Suffering is perceived as self-inflicted or as the price for sin. That assessment also feeds into our notion of original sin. God as the creator is good and in no way can be the source of evil. Sin is the consequence of our violation of freedom— a transgression of the moral law— and is an offense against God, the divine lawgiver. It follows that God as the just judge rewards good and punishes evil. This reckoning of the moral order would have us interpret suffering as “justified evil.” However, the story of Job, while not invalidating this stance, shows that it is overly simplistic.

Pope John Paul II writes in *Salvifici Doloris* that Job is “the story of this just man, who without any fault of his own is tried by innumerable sufferings... loses his possessions, his sons and daughters, and finally he himself is afflicted by a grave sickness.” Job honestly reflects upon his life and upon the good he has done. He can see no grounds upon which he deserves the

punishment that comes to him. “In the end, God himself reproves Job’s friends for their accusations and recognizes that Job is not guilty. His suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent and it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence.” The notion of an innocent victim will find its prime paradigm in Jesus Christ. The setting for the testing of Job is one that emerges from the devil’s provocation. “And if the Lord consents to test Job with suffering, he does it to demonstrate the latter’s righteousness.” Francis Bacon once wrote, “In order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present.”

While life can be hard and suffering comes to all, we are admonished not to despair. The psalm tells us, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” The Church realizes this promise by extending the message and mission of Jesus. Our souls are healed and we know forgiveness. One day we will be restored, body and spirit. While we live in a world where some seem to suffer more than their lot, we are also told that “The LORD sustains the lowly; the wicked he casts to the ground.” The innocent might sometimes suffer and the wicked may appear to flourish. But God sees everything, and the innocent will be gifted with mercy while evil doers will merit justice. The early Jews largely defined divine reward as wealth, power, property and children in this world. The question of Job and suffering would move them to consider life after death. There has to be an existence where the scales are balanced in favor of the innocent.

Most eulogies celebrate life and leave unspoken certain truths that make us fearful. We selectively remember someone as fun to be around or who knew how to have a good time or who did not make too many demands upon us. Nothing is said about a general lack of charity or a failure to sacrifice for others or one too self-preoccupied to worry about anyone else. We extract a list of secular virtues that would make one well-remembered in this world but still largely unknown in the next. We mention his favorite food, that he was a fan for the local football team, and that his dog will miss him. “We will never forget him. He will always remain in our memories.” That is what we tell ourselves. Of course, life goes on and a short time later most would have put him out of mind. His name will go unspoken. Photos will be filed away in an album that will one day be opened by relatives not yet born. They will look at his picture and wonder, who is that? People of faith tend to focus on the positive. They figure that we might as well imagine he is in heaven so as not to distress his family and friends. After all, if he is in hell, who among us will know until we are dead? Catholics might pray for his soul as one in purgatory, but are fearful of asking others to pray with them since it means that judgment after death is real. We are attracted to Christ as the Divine Mercy, but not so much to the Lord as Divine Justice. Nevertheless, they are both truthful assessments about his identity. Love is stronger than death. Love is forever and in Christ it has conquered the grave. God will love us forever and thus he gives us a share in his life. This is the great consolation for believers. But

we must not forget that just as the beatific vision and the joy of the saints is eternal, so is hell-fire.

St. Paul tells the Corinthians, “To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some.” The Christian kerygma is one that challenges basic Jewish presumptions about social position reflecting divine favor. The apostle is literally saying that he is making himself a slave for others. He is fulfilling the summons of Christ to take up the cross in following him. That is fundamental to the sacrifices made by priests and religious to celibacy, poverty and obedience. They embrace for the kingdom that which is traditionally regarded as punishment or curse. The Christian meaning of suffering would forever be associated with the Paschal Mystery of Christ. If we die with Christ then we can live with him. We offer ourselves as grafted to the crucified Savior. We take all the struggle, sickness, pain, loss, and hurt we experience and make them redemptive in the Lord. Catholicism emphasizes that even the dark things of life can come to God’s glory.

It was this message about suffering that was a hallmark in the witness of the late Mother Teresa. It was also a truth about which her critics despised and maligned her. Those who saw no value in pain hated Mother Teresa. They are the same voices that speak in favor of abortion and euthanasia, today.

Turning to the Gospel, Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law. Later, we are told that “the whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him.” Everyone he healed would get sick and die. All his miracles and healings pointed to the lasting healing of the soul, in the forgiveness of sins. He will give us a share in his Easter mystery. Jesus is the revelation of the Father, the face of God. When our Lord acts, it is always to heal and to liberate. All who suffer can find solidarity in Christ.

- When we cannot escape pain, do we become frustrated and angry?
- Have we ever embraced suffering and discomfort as mortification and penance?
- How do we take up our crosses in following Jesus?
- Can we add our struggle to the passion of Jesus as an offering to the Father?
- Do we place our hopes in what this world offers or in the kingdom of Christ?
- If we should die today, are we prepared for judgment?
- Have we experienced cases where the wicked flourished and the innocent suffered?
- While we believe that the scales of justice will be balanced in the world to come, what is our obligation to building up the kingdom in the here-and-now?