

One of the most difficult questions that we will ever encounter as Christians is the problem of suffering. We profess our faith in a God who is all-good and all-powerful. So why would he allow us to suffer? And not only allow us to suffer, but often to suffer in some of the worst ways imaginable - hurricanes and tornados, famine and drought, sickness and death... why would God allow this? Couldn't God use His power to prevent suffering and evil? Wouldn't God's goodness want us to be spared from such pain?

These are questions that people can grapple with their whole lives, questions that keep people from accepting God's gift of faith. And there are no simple answer to these kinds of questions. There is no magic bullet that will shatter every resistance in the heart of one who struggles with the problem of suffering. But in this mystery, there is one truth that we can know without a doubt: we are never left to suffer alone. We have a God who suffers with us, who suffers for us.

In the Gospel, James and John did not yet fully grasp the coming suffering for which Christ had been trying to prepare them. Their request to be seated at the right and left hand of Jesus in His glory was really a desire for power and prestige. To sit on the right and the left of the king was the place of highest honor. But Jesus tried to correct their misunderstanding by explaining to them what would be required to arrive at this glory. This glory that they were seeking means drinking the cup that Jesus would drink and being baptized with the same baptism as Jesus.

What is this cup? What is this baptism? The cup is the chalice of which Jesus spoke at His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will.” The cup is the chalice of Jesus’ suffering. The baptism is what Jesus spoke of in St. Luke’s Gospel: “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!” The baptism that Jesus described to James and John was a total immersion in suffering.

But James and John did not realize that Jesus was referring to the great suffering He would endure, and so they even agree to share in Jesus’ cup and in His baptism. Indeed, they would share in His suffering. St. James became the first apostle to suffer martyrdom not many years after this conversation. He gave his life for his faith in Christ. And St. John won the crown of confessor of the faith, suffering greatly for the Lord, but not being put to death.

In this episode of the Gospel, we see the great love of Christ who suffered for us. Jesus is the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah: “...through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.” Through His suffering, Jesus offer forgiveness and reconciliation and redemption to the many, to the multitude. All people are offered this gift of salvation and redemption.

But as Jesus tells James and John, accepting this gift of salvation and redemption means accepting the cup of Christ; it means accepting the baptism of Christ. Our salvation and redemption are not automatic. We don't receive the gift of heaven just because we say the the right words or because we are so-called good people. The gift of salvation and redemption comes when we unite ourselves to Christ, especially in His suffering. St. Rose of Lima said, "Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven." When we are willing to share in the suffering of Christ, then when are able to share with Him in His glory. When we unite our suffering to the suffering of Christ, then our suffering becomes redemptive for us and for the whole world. When we unit our suffering to the suffering of Christ, that suffering can open our hearts and even the hearts of others to the salvation and the redemption that Jesus offers to all of us.

And so why would God allow the terrible pain and suffering that we see so often around us? Because suffering itself is the path to perfect union with Christ. Our joyful acceptance of suffering, our embrace of the cross of Jesus is our ladder to heaven. May God give us the courage and the fortitude and the love to climb that ladder.