

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 7, 2024

As you well know, early Christians suffered greatly for their faith. At first it just involved tensions with their Jewish brothers and sisters, as the followers of Jesus sought to remain within the faith community they grew up in.

But eventually this proved a little too difficult, and caused the early Christian community to actually split from Judaism. Who knows what this must have been like for them? Many of their relationships with family and friends were almost certainly never the same.

The most dramatic suffering Christians faced was during the time of various persecutions at the hands of certain Roman emperors. This was violent, life-or-death suffering, the kind that none of us would want to face. But one thing seems pretty clear. Martyrdom was seen as an evidence that they were being faithful.

After all, Jesus suffered for us, so shouldn't we suffer for him? That seems "fair". And so, the faithful almost always understood their sufferings and persecutions as a

kind of proof that they were on the right path, following faithfully in the footsteps of their Lord Jesus Christ.

And in a certain sense, we still embrace that same idea that to be a faithful Christian means that we will certainly suffer for our beliefs, suffer for the values we strive to uphold. Put another way, following Jesus is not easy, never has been and never will it be. And if we want a faith that puts few demands on us, we've "picked" the wrong one. Loving as Jesus loved, and standing for the things he stood for, comes with a cost, the cost of our whole selves. And sometimes we will get hurt.

Today's readings show us three different ways that might happen. In the First Reading we hear how Ezekiel answered God's call, how the spirit entered him and motivated him to accept God's invitation to speak God's word to the Israelites. And Ezekiel knows exactly what that means; that some people will accept what he is saying and some will not. Prophets always said the tough things that needed to be said, and consequently received the ire of many. And the same thing can happen to us. In other words, as we try to live as faithfully as possible, some people simply won't like what we have to say, won't

like the message. They have a problem with the actual “content” of our faith.

In the Gospel reading from St. Mark, we see another way what we might have to suffer for the faith. In this passage Jesus is preaching in the synagogue in his hometown. And that means that his listeners are people who know him and have probably known him since he was a boy. The interesting thing is that while they were astonished by his wisdom and the things he was saying and the mighty deeds he had done, they still took offense at him. In this case, they were okay with the message, but weren't okay with the messenger. Something just didn't fit, and that caused them to push back against him, caused them to be “closed off” rather than be “open to” what he was saying. And the same thing sometimes happen to me and you and mostly we the International priests everywhere.

Sometimes the things we say fall on deaf ears not because of what we are saying, but because of who we are, or what others know about us, or their mindset or the experiences they have had with us. This kind of suffering and rejection is personal. And it hurts.

The third way we might suffer is on display in the Second Reading from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. We see the very human side of Paul as he writes about being given a "thorn in the flesh" and an "angel of Satan to beat him". Many have speculated as to what this might be, maybe a physical ailment or affliction, or maybe a spiritual one or some sort of temptation or failing or sin.

And while it might be interesting to wonder what he might have been going through, one point comes out loud and clear. You see, just because we have given ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, just because we are disciples trying to live faithfully and carry out God's will as best as we understand it does not mean that our problems go away. Life still goes on and unfolds in ways we can't always understand. Problems still arise. Illnesses still occur. Relationships still face difficulties. Sin still rears its ugly head. Faith does not eliminate those things but rather ensures that those things don't ultimately win. It's why the Gospel of Prosperity often preached on television is not always true. A rosy, affluent, pain-free life is no more proof of God's favor than suffering or impoverishment is proof of a lack of it.

And so, for us if we are experiencing these sorts of disappointments and painful experiences, these things can be a kind of evidence that we indeed are being faithful. Isn't that how it works? Isn't that the "martyrdom" we can all share in, a martyrdom that is pleasing to God? Maybe.

You see, just because we are suffering in these ways does not necessarily mean that we are doing things right. We might be suffering for the wrong reasons, suffering unnecessarily simply because we are not going about things in the best way possible, in the most faithful way possible. Let's look at the two examples and see how this might be the case.

First, the times when people have a hard time taking us seriously in matters of faith because they are close to us, or have known us a long time, might not be about that at all. It might simply be because they see an obvious "disconnect" between the things we are saying and the way we actually live our lives. Many of us can "talk" a good game, but often spend little time trying to put our words into practice. Blatant hypocrisy can be a kind of message-killer for others. Most people will readily accept the failings of other people, but will not accept people

who seem completely inauthentic, seem to say one thing and knowingly embrace something altogether different.

And secondly, regarding our personal sufferings, it's important to always remember to start with ourselves. That means, as we go about trying to share the Gospel, share the faith, share our values, we must always be mindful of our own profound dependence on God, be mindful of our own sinfulness, our own need for God's mercy, our own need for his forgiveness and his healing touch and his comfort and his strength. This is what true humility is all about, remembering and acknowledging that a better world, a more faithful world, does not start with someone else. It starts with me and it starts with you. And so, sharing my faith is not just about telling others what I believe. It's more about revealing to others the difference faith has made in my actual life, the ways God has continually loved me and strengthened me and guided me, the countless ways I have messed up and been given a second chance. As St. Paul put it so well,

“. . . for power is made perfect in weakness.”

And so, let's leave this holy place today ready and willing to suffer for what is right, suffer for trying to do the loving

thing, the God-like thing. But at the same time, let's make sure that the message and the messenger match; that people who encounter us don't simply hear the words, but rather see true faith on display; see a person striving to show compassion and forgiveness and mercy and generosity and love.

I believe that's pretty hard to resist.