

Homily for 24th Sunday

Suffering and finding God and greater life through suffering is a main theme in today's scripture. Our first reading is the third Suffering Servant Song of four in the book of Isaiah. The Suffering Servant expresses confidence that God is with him as he endures undeserved punishment. He has listened to God's word in preparation for speaking it to the exiled Israelites. His message has brought him pain and rejection, but God is his companion. Often this passage is taken to allude to the sufferings of Jesus. And very aptly so! Jesus takes up his cross willingly, for he knows this is the final act of love. What is the human response to this love? What is our response to this suffering love of God? Our own response to the immense love of God made visible in the suffering of Jesus could be to accept our own human condition that comes with some degree of pain and suffering. It may not necessarily imply dying for God. But often suffering consists in the little troubles that we have to endure when we aspire for higher purpose in life. Speaking in very simple terms, for instance, it is easier to watch TV than to read a book. At another level, it is easier to join a friend in their birthday celebration than to reach out to a stranger in need. Watching TV and joining in celebration could provide us with some sense of pleasure. On the other hand, reaching out to a stranger in need initially demands some effort – some risk and suffering – but eventually that act of kindness brings a sense of gratification. Often we humans tend to choose the easier path. Repeatedly making such choice of pleasurable experiences only makes us losers. A pastor in a Christian church was talking to a member of his congregation: "And how is your husband today? I'm afraid he's very ill. No, no, corrected the pastor, "You really shouldn't say that - you should say that he's under the impression that he's very ill. The woman nods in agreement, "Yes, I'll remember next time. A few weeks later the pastor saw the woman again. And how is your husband at the moment? "Well", she replied, "he's under the impression that he's dead!"

In the gospel text of today, therefore, Jesus invites us to challenge ourselves to make that initial effort to choose acts of higher purpose which may entail some suffering so that we will enjoy immense gratification in due course – the resurrection and the foretaste of heaven: "For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, will save it" (Mk 8:35). True discipleship is seen when we are faithful to God in times of suffering. Jesus led by example and his total love for each of us was shown by his terrible suffering and death on the cross. People got rid of Jesus. His demands to love were too much. Who is Jesus for me personally? No matter what we like to think, Jesus reveals God as God is. So he is challenging us to go deep to the roots of our faith by making this faith truly personal. James presents an acid test to all who call themselves Christians. Our faith is hollow unless it is expressed, and works are the only indication of a person's faith. Social justice is not optional. So when I see a woman pushing around her husband in a wheel chair because he is paralysed and she is faithful to him now in this difficult time of his life or see a man taking care of his wife who has Alzheimer's disease or a family accepting and loving their son as he is dying of AIDs etc. etc. am I not seeing Jesus the Christ still in action in our world? Is not this what discipleship truly means and reveals to others who God is too whether they see and accept it or not. God is always with us to strengthen us and give us courage during these difficult times.

'Lord, help us not to be seeking a God of the extraordinary but help us see you revealing yourself to us still in the goodness, the suffering of others in daily life situations. Where there is love, surely you are there. Amen.'