

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Isaiah 50:5-9 / Mark 8:27-35)

15.09.2024

*Suffering*

Today our two readings put the preacher in a very difficult situation: who likes to speak publicly about suffering? Who would dare to believe that our poor human words could say something meaningful about what most of the time appears meaningless?

The challenge may go deeper than our difficulty to find adequate words; it may be linked to the fact that like St Peter we are afraid of suffering. Perhaps some of us, obstinately but uselessly, dream of living lives devoid of pain, sorrow and distress. We forget that suffering is part of every human life.

Jesus has always been quite clear about that fact of life, and especially when it comes to the lives of his disciples: "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. (...) Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." (Jn 15:18.20)

Jesus' focus is life, fullness of life (cf. Jn 10:10) and so what he promises us is not a life without suffering, for that would not be a true human life. What he promises is that, because he defeated suffering and death, we are empowered to deal with suffering and death. His victory is ours and so, we believe and we know that suffering and death do not have the last word. In Christ, love is stronger than death.

Thanks to love, the cross became a sign of victory. In our lives, as we imitate Christ and his self-giving love, all our crosses can become a source of renewed life. Mysteriously they can help us as we long to become truly human and fully alive.

This humble process of imitation of Christ is the only way for us to break the deadly cycle of "hurt people hurt people." Only the seed of love, sown in the land of sorrow and pain can "turn a desert into pools of water, and a parched land into springs of water." (Ps 107:35) Revenge, bitterness, unforgiveness, self-pity dry up the source of life and cause our suffering to hurt ourselves and others.

It is clear, and yet it is necessary to say it, that we are not supposed to look for suffering and pain. We do not rejoice because we suffer but when the path is rough and the horizon seems to be closed, we stand firm because we know that the Lord is faithful to his promise: he will go before us and level the mountains, he will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron (cf. Is 45:2).

The second thing which needs to be said is that we are supposed to do all we can to remove suffering and alleviate pain. We must change our hearts and society so that all women, men and children may live in peace, have access to physical and mental health care, education and leisure. We must welcome the stranger, refugees and migrants in ways that respect them. We must support and encourage humanitarian organisations which intervene in places of conflict and natural disasters. All this is part of our duty if we want to be human beings fully alive, if we want, in some way, to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel.

Jesus' call to lose our lives is a call to take the risk to love, to hope and to trust. For us, unfortunately, "to save our lives" implies that we become self-centred and self-preoccupied. In some way we "freeze" our ability to feel, to connect and to venture beyond what is known and secure. To use an evangelical image, we behave like the servant in the parable who "dug a hole in the ground and hid" the talent he had received (Mt 25:18).

While often we opt for self-protection and refuse to love and trust again because we have been hurt or betrayed, Jesus reminds us that “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn 15:13)

Suffering wins the battle, not when we are hurt, but when we allow it to prevent us from living life to the full, when it overwhelms us to the point when we are no longer able to go the extra mile (cf. Mt 5:41), to welcome the stranger (Mt 25:35), to forgive from our heart (cf. Mt 18:35), and to walk with one another in love (cf. Rm 14:15).

In his rebuke to Jesus: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Mt 16:22), St Peter was looking for a safe option, a secure way to achieve a small human goal. He had no idea, he could not envision that God, in Jesus, was going to accomplish far more than all he could ask or imagine (cf. Eph 3:20).

Love revealed in Jesus’ self-giving could not be pettily measured and safely channelled, it had to overflow, to generously reach out to the whole world and break all the barriers of race, religion, gender, class and political affiliation.

Today we are reminded that such fruitful love, such self-giving, will always entail a certain form of renunciation, some risks and sometimes a degree of suffering. Yet, by his life and his words, Jesus shows us the way: “Give and it will be given to you. A good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you will get back.” (Lk 6:38)

May we not be afraid to follow the Lord on his path of generous love. May we be seeds of “new life in the Spirit” in our families, communities and in the world. May we look for new ways to be generous, connect with renewed ways to be the Church of God, and discern the new paths that will lead us to a greater fidelity to the Gospel.