



**Easter 7, Year A – June 5, 2011**

1 Peter 4.12-14 & 5.6-11

**A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker**

Well, it happened to me again last week. It happens most weeks, as a matter of fact. There I was, bright and early for a 9.00 a.m. haircut, carefully arranged for the only block of time I had available before flying to Ontario, and no one even came to open the shop until 9.07. No sooner was I seated than the receptionist came over and announced that four of the staff (including my guy, of course!) had called in sick. I decided to try one of those walk-in places. However, by 9.45 I was still far enough back in line that I knew I would never be finished in time to make my 10.30 meeting, and so I got up and hurried over to the church. My 10.30 person did not show. Time was running short, and in the midst of trying to return three urgent phone calls to people who hadn't thought to leave a number, I heard myself say (again), "Why is nothing *ever* easy?"

As if, that is, I somehow believed that things *should* be easy. As if I were somehow justified in organising my time on the assumption that little snags are the exception, not the rule.

I cannot think that I am alone in this little fantasy. It is, I suppose, fairly harmless when it comes to begonias and floppy disks. But it is an altogether more serious matter when it comes to the stillbirth of a baby tried for five times over, or to intractable pain, or to the loss of one's job when nobody is hiring people over 55. This is the stuff of real suffering, and it is all the more difficult to bear if we are captivated by the myth that we ought not to have to suffer, that life should be easy, and that our troubles are the exception, not the rule.

This, I take it, is what the writer of First Peter is trying to say. Scholars believe that this letter was probably written to a Church in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), around the time that the emperor Nero had instigated a fierce persecution against the Christians. Here is a Church which is paying for its faith with its blood. It is a fact they have had some difficulty coming to terms with. For why else would the writer say, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you"? You don't tell people not to be surprised by something unless they *are* surprised by it. We are thus not alone: it is plain that from the very beginning, Christians have laboured under the fond and vain expectation that as the children of God, they should be protected from the underside of life.

And that is perhaps the first point to be made: there are no exemptions — not from suffering, not from inconvenience, and certainly not from death — for those who believe. We are not to be surprised by this.

However, having said this, we need not conclude that our faith must therefore be of no use to us. The whole reason this letter is written is that our faith *does* make a difference. It would hardly have been worth the bother if all the writer had had to say was, "Don't be ridiculous: of course you are going to suffer. Buck up." On the contrary, he writes because he has words of comfort. And they are these:

In the first place, the writer says, "Cast all your anxieties on God, for God cares about you." This, of course, is why we *can* cast our anxieties upon God. There is nothing worse than unburdening ourselves upon an unsympathetic listener. What the writer is saying is that our troubles *matter* to God, that even though he does not

intervene to rescue us, this does not mean that he is remote or unconcerned: *God cares*.

Perhaps you are inclined to ask, So what? And I will grant that talking about our problems (even with someone who truly cares) seldom, if ever, makes them go away. But I do know from both personal and professional experience that even to hear ourselves describe our troubles can be enormously helpful. I often liken it to laying down a load of bricks, and examining it until you are able to rearrange the load, thus making it just a bit easier to carry. "Cast all your anxieties upon God," says the writer, "for God cares for you."

Secondly, he goes on to say, "know that the same experience of suffering is required of your brothers and sisters throughout the world." In other words, no matter how severe your pain, how immobilising your sorrow, you are not alone. What the writer is saying is not so much that misery loves company (although this may be true), nor that there is strength in numbers (although this may also be true), but that to suffer is part of the human experience. It happens to everybody and we need not take it personally. Suffering belongs to our humanity: and what matters is how we choose to bear and endure it, for this will reveal a great deal about us, and the depth of our character.

I am put in mind of a woman I once met who was full of rheumatoid arthritis. From her mid thirties, she had been confined to various walking devices, and her hands were so misshapen as to be almost useless to her. She told me the story of a somewhat tactless parish priest who had been to visit her. She had been whining about her sorry situation, and demanded to know, "Why *me*?" The priest said to her matter-of-factly, "Why *not* you?" Well, she was so angry, she threw him out of her house. But she began to reflect on what he had said. And she realised that while she was no more deserving of bad health than the next person, she was also no more deserving of *good* health. God sends his rain on the just and the unjust. It isn't personal. This was an insight which changed that woman, and how she went about her painful life.

And finally, there is a word of promise, a word of hope. "And after you have suffered a little while" the writer says, "the God of all grace will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you." Which is to say, our sufferings are not forever. An end is in sight — in fact, a glorious end. I once commented to a friend, who had enrolled in a very demanding continuing education course, without relinquishing any of his other responsibilities, that I thought he was carrying far too heavy a load. His response was, "Hey. Most of us can bear anything for a little while." And that is the point of laying hold of this promise: our sufferings, no matter how awful, cannot help but look more manageable when set against the light at the end of the tunnel. Those who believe in resurrection after crucifixion, those who believe in heaven after earth, have an immeasurable advantage in walking the way of this life.

In some sense, what we have in First Peter is a good news/bad news dynamic. The bad news is that suffering is an unavoidable component of the human experience. There are no exemptions for anyone, not even for believers. And we may as well put to rest any assumption that life ought to be either easy or pain-free. But the good news is first, that God cares for us in our anxieties; second, that we are not alone, nor are we specially targeted for our various tribulations; and thirdly, that an end — a glorious end — is in sight. I should think that by any standard, the good news outweighs the bad.