



Trinity Sunday, Year C – May 29, 2010

Romans 5.1-5

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

I remember vividly long walks to Sir John A. Macdonald High School with my best friend Kathy. Inevitably, in our conversation, we would try to outdo one another in hardship. If I had some grievance (such as, I ran out of time to study for the Chemistry test, or could see the visitation of some new zit upon my chin), Kathy always had a crisis which was one better. That's nothing!, she would say (which, I might add, was not exactly a pastoral response, since in the moment it didn't seem like "nothing" to me!) She would go on, "I forgot to bring my Chemistry textbook home." Or she had a zit which was bigger, or redder, or more prominently positioned, such as on the end of her nose.

In his letter to the Church at Rome, St Paul says, We will boast not only in our hope of sharing the glory of God. We also boast in our sufferings. Is this what he means? Does he mean that we are to focus upon and highlight our troubles? For, to be sure, many of us, when we figure out that we can't be the best at our chosen endeavour, that we can't garner people's attention for our successes, turn instead to our troubles. If I can't be the best, then perhaps I can be the most pitiable. Either way, there's lots of attention to be had. Is this what Paul means?

No. Paul is writing in the context of persecution and derision. People are ridiculing the Christians because, despite their claims to God's chosenness, they do not seem to be prospering. Many of them lack wealth; they eschew preferments in the court of the emperor; they have been cast out of their synagogues. This was a culture in which suffering was perceived as a sign that God was displeased with you. (Which is possibly only the inverse of the so-called "prosperity gospel" of our own day, where money, promotions, and reputation are all viewed as the indisputable evidence that God has smiled upon you.) Paul is actually rebutting his detractors, and saying, No. Our sufferings are not a matter for shame. We actually *boast* in them.

One caveat: Paul is not suggesting that God *sends* these sufferings -- for as Scripture says, God's rain falls on the just and the unjust. Or put another way (in a slightly sanitized version for use in the pulpit), "Stuff happens."

What Paul *is* saying is that his sufferings have been the occasion for spiritual growth. Suffering, he says, produces endurance (or "patience"). Interesting that the Latin word "to suffer" is "passio," from which we also get the word "passion" (the name we give to the suffering of Christ), and also, the noun "patient" – that is, a person who is suffering. Patience is, in fact, to *endure*, to bide one's time while being "done upon." *Impatience*, on the other hand, is to be in a big hurry, and disinclined to put up with anything which gets in our way. We have things to do, places to go. And we won't (as we say) "suffer" fools gladly or setbacks easily. But you see, for a Christian, there really isn't any hurry, is there?, because we see time differently. We don't have a "dead-line." All that counts is today – in fact, all that counts is this moment, right now, whether we are awake to it or asleep, surrendering to it (patiently), or fighting it.

Paul goes on. Endurance, he says, produces character (or as the old KJV put it, "experience.") I can tell you that it is my own *experience* of such things as pain, grief, abandonment, debt, fear, unemployment, violence, more than any course I have taken, any book that I have read, any exercise of loving imagination, even,

that has taught me what it is to suffer in these ways. It is the sum and intertwining of my experience that give me depth and texture, compassion, and, please God, a modicum of wisdom. Or to use the word employed by the New Revised Standard Version, "character."

And character, says Paul, produces hope. In the face of serious suffering, hope is sometimes the only thing we have. But this said, hope is a powerful drug. Hope is what gets you out of bed in the morning. Hope is what motivates you to try one more time. Hope is what propels people to endure painful procedures or to undergo chemotherapy. Hope is what keeps us seeking after a better tomorrow, and therefore, it is what keeps us engaged in the living of life.

Now, is this always the case?

Of course not. I'll bet you know as many people as I do whose suffering has made them bitter, cantankerous, or despondent. They are angry at God, they are angry at the world, and they feel sorry for themselves. But isn't that exactly the point?

St Paul is saying, Look. Suffering is part of life. Stuff happens. God sends his rain on the just and unjust. The point is, *Don't waste the pain!* We can let our suffering twist and diminish our spirits, or we can endure it, allowing it to build character, and to produce hope. It is up to us to determine how we will deal with suffering and sorrow and setbacks when they come to us – as they almost certainly will. We need not be pitiable. We need not be bitter, as if we, of all people, somehow "deserved" better from God and from life. Rather we can choose to treat our sufferings as a tutor in soulfulness, a teacher of compassion, and a way to wisdom.

For as Paul says, "We have peace... because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the power of Holy Spirit."