



Way of the Cross– March 28, 2010
Suffering

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

Any of us who have had the experience of visiting an emergency room or urgent care facility may recall being asked the intensity of our pain on a scale from one to 10. From pain that is barely noticeable through annoying to incapacitating to excruciating. Even if we have managed to avoid the question from an ER triage nurse, we all might be able to evaluate the amount of pain and suffering that have besieged us in our lives, perhaps, even on one to 10 scale, ranging from say a nearly idyllic life through a life of ups and downs to a life of unremitting trial and tribulation.

All of us lead lives punctuated or even plagued by suffering, and then we die. We suffer illness and injury. We suffer loss and grief. We suffer anxiety and uncertainty. We suffer the painful consequences of our own willfulness, hubris, and ignorance. But we also suffer – innocently – as victims of the insensitivity, cowardice, and unkindness of others. In much of the world, that equates with hunger, thirst, exposure, disease, exploitation, and oppression. And we suffer from what we have deigned to call natural disasters or “Acts of God” like hurricanes, earthquakes, and avalanches. Even if we manage to sidestep the greater calamities of life, whether we rate our level of suffering in our lives at one or 10, we will die.

Yet we place all this suffering and death within the providence of a God we proclaim to be loving and just. What are we to make of this, this God of love and mercy, of compassion and justice, who brought into being a world where suffering and death are as inevitable as the next sunrise?

Our intellectual musings about the reality of suffering and death and how they reflect on God’s providence may leave us grasping for answers. But when God in the person of Jesus Christ walks the way of the cross and experiences suffering and death, we can get a glimpse into the mind of God. We at least appreciate that God participates in suffering and identifies with all who suffer. And, perhaps, we can begin to see dimly on the periphery some notions of the place of pain and suffering in the divine milieu.

Jesus Christ walked a path of betrayal by one of his own and abandonment by the rest, of injustice and humiliation at the hands of those who feared him, of pain and suffering in the exquisite torture of crucifixion, of death and loss, and sorrow and grief that most of us – thankfully – would find inconceivable. This was pain and suffering of an order of magnitude of 10 times 10 times 10.

For thousands of years, suffering had been understood as a sort of divine penalty or punishment for sin and evil. How often in the Hebrew Bible do we read that the nation of Israel turned away from God only to suffer military defeat or exile. God was seen as administering suffering and defeat as punishment for unfaithfulness. But Jesus in his life and ministry consistently denounced this view of suffering. And in his condemnation and crucifixion, Jesus at once disavows us of any such notion. No one could claim that Jesus was condemned because he was unfaithful or sinful. If the innocent suffer, then human concepts of just desserts offer no basis for understanding pain and suffering as God’s wrath on sinners.

Still, we cannot neglect the reality that our thoughtless and willful actions have their consequences. Those who abuse their bodies with copious amounts of fatty fast food, three packs a day, two six packs a day, or unnecessary medications or illegal drugs

will suffer by their own actions. And we as a culture will pay a price for fouling our air, water, and soil, as well as for denying education, health care, and opportunity to our companions on the road of life. These are simply natural consequences for which God might rightly point the finger at us. Can we really blame God for giving us free will when it is we who take that freedom as licence to do our will, regardless of the consequences to ourselves or others?

But suffering can have some beneficial consequences. In our suffering we learn empathy for others who suffer. Suffering also can form and strengthen community, not only because we can more readily offer sympathy, but also because suffering knows no bounds of class or status. And the shadow of death looms over all our every step. In this way, we are more alike than different from our neighbours in the world. It creates an affinity at a very deep level.

And in our own suffering, we can learn humility and patience and endurance and discipline. We can learn to let people love and care for us and in so doing love them by showing our trust for them and their love for us. Perhaps, as Jesus accepted the help of Simon of Cyrene. Mainly, I think, suffering teaches us how to surrender our lust for total control of our lives. Once Jesus took up his cross, Jesus lost the last vestige of control he might have had over his plight. When we abandon our insistence on control, when we realize we have nowhere else to turn, we can only place our trust in God and those God has placed in our path to love us and care for us in our suffering. And it teaches us how important hope must be in our lives.

In his suffering, Jesus never lost hope. He never disconnected from God. Suffering may cause us to focus on ourselves, to become isolated from friends and family and alienated from God. But Jesus stayed in touch. He continued to pray. For deliverance. For the women of Jerusalem. For forgiveness of his torturers. For understanding why he had to suffer. But he never let his agony or laments or questions come between him and God. In our suffering, too, we will wonder why me? We will whine at God, feeling angry and betrayed. And that will be alright. It will be nothing new to a God who has embraced suffering and identified very personally with the sufferer.

Does this answer every question we may have about suffering and death? Probably not. But maybe we can learn how to cope with suffering in a more faithful – that is, more trusting way. Staying in communication, asking the questions, even shouting at God is far more important than finding satisfactory solutions to intellectual dilemmas posed by suffering. And as to our questions. Well, the story does not end in the tomb. Perhaps, a week from now we will have learned something more about the role of suffering in the providence of a loving God.

Amen.