

Homily for February 3rd 2024

Being shaped down here to fit in up there.

Driving through Texas, a New Yorker collided with a truck carrying a horse. A few months later he tried to collect damages for his injuries. "How can you now claim to have all these injuries?" asked the insurance company's lawyer. "According to the police report, at the time you said you were not hurt." "Look," replied the New Yorker. "I was lying on the road in a lot of pain, and I heard someone say the horse had a broken leg. The next thing I know this Texas Ranger pulls out his gun and shoots the horse. Then he turns to me and asks, 'Are you okay?'"

There are times in our lives when like this New Yorker we may deny our suffering because we are afraid to face them. How often people can go through years of their lives where they have suppressed their pain and then come to the place where they begin to confront it with honesty and courage. Although suffering is something that people say often leads them to questioning God, it is also true that when people face their suffering it can be transformative.

There was a business man who in a time of recession lost his job, a sizable fortune, and his beautiful home. To add to his sorrow, his precious wife died; yet he tenaciously held to his faith the only thing he had left. One day when he was out walking in search of employment, he stopped to watch some men who were doing stonework on a large church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of rock. 'Where are you going to put that?' he asked. The workman said, 'Do you see that little opening up there near the spire? Well, I'm shaping this stone down here so that it will fit in up there.' Tears filled the man's eyes as he walked away, for the Lord had spoken to him through that labourer whose words gave new meaning to his troubled situation.

It's been said that a clay pot sitting in the sun will always be a clay pot. It has to go through the white heat of the furnace to become porcelain. So often it is through our suffering that we are being shaped down here so that we will fit in up there.

I know some of you listening to me today are going through a time, or your whole life, seems to be the experience of unrelenting shaping and you are saying: "Enough already, God, enough!"

Today the theme of human suffering confronts us whereby we are invited to give voice to the sheer magnitude of this human pain. Perhaps no one has given such articulate expression to this as did Job. I want to read our first lesson in a more contemporized English.

*Human life is a struggle, isn't it?
It's a life sentence to hard labor.
Like field hands longing for quitting time
and working stiffs with nothing to hope for but payday,
I'm given a life that meanders and goes nowhere—
months of aimlessness, nights of misery!
I go to bed and think, 'How long till I can get up?'*

*I toss and turn as the night drags on—and I'm fed up!
My days come and go swifter than the click of knitting needles,
and then the yarn runs out—an unfinished life!*¹

Have you ever felt like Job? Been in that place, or perhaps you are in that place right now, where the pain seems to be a life sentence that will one day just expire. Job was there.

We read earlier in this book that there was no one more righteous than Job and then he is confronted with one personal tragedy after another. His adult children are killed, his land is destroyed and he experiences a life altering illness.

Through it all the question is asked: “Why”? In the long silence where there is no seeming answer forthcoming Job’s cries out with today’s reading, and says being human is like a sentence of hard labour.

There’s a musician named Sara Groves who has a song where she sings about how life is filled with “patches of joy and stretches of sorrow”. In other words, yes there's joy, but a lot of times they tend to be short and beautiful. But we’ve got these long stretches of suffering and sorrow, and you can even see in Job, this image of the night taking so long. That in the midst of anxiety, or maybe when you're ill or worried, you can stay awake all night, and the night can get really long. And it's at night that we can really experience our own weakness, our own littleness, and just the reality of human suffering, and human misery in this life. And as a result, we can kind of be more in tune to the fact that, when you really get down to things, our life, as Job says, is just a breath, right. We’re here for a very short while and then we’re gone.

Now what does that have to do with the gospel? Well think about it. The gospel for this week is focused on the fact that Jesus isn't just an exorcist, he’s not just with power over the demonic, he's also Jesus the healer. He comes into this world not just to cast out the great power of the devil. He comes into this world to touch the misery of human life. He comes into this world to heal us, even down to the very small things like the misery of a fever, of ordinary human illness. That’s something that Jesus comes in this world and shows us he has power over. He has the power to bring peace to us in the midst of our suffering and through the resurrection he’s going to overcome all of that. He’s not just going to overcome Satan, he’s going to overcome suffering, sickness, and death itself.

And so the first reading for today is a beautiful example from the Old Testament, the reality of human misery, which has its answer in the good news of Jesus Christ and in the good news of our Savior.

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Job 7:1–6). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

But you might be saying, “Well hold on, I know somebody who is sick or maybe I'm sick and Christ hasn't healed me. What is that about?”

To answer this question I want to share a paragraph from the Catechism that will appear on the screen”

Moved by so much suffering Christ not only allows himself to be touched by the sick, but he makes their miseries his own: But he did not heal all the sick. . By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion.

In a nutshell, what's it saying here? It is really important. Yes, Christ comes in to the world to heal. Yes, he shows us his power over sickness and suffering. But his mission, his vocation by God the Father, is not to heal every single sick person. Those healings are signs of the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God ultimately comes through his supreme victory in his death and resurrection on the cross. It's only in light of the resurrection that every sickness, every suffering, and all death will be undone. For now, we have to recognize that God allows sickness and suffering to take place, and that for us as Christians, Christ has given a new meaning to our sickness and our suffering, by uniting it to the cross, by uniting it to his passion, so that we can actually, in union with Christ, offer our illness, offer our sufferings, for the salvation of the world in union with his redemptive passion and cross. In other words, Christ's death and resurrection not only brings the ultimate healing in the future, it also brings meaning to our suffering now in the present as we walk through this valley of tears and we taste the drudgery and the misery that Job talked about in the first reading. In the midst of that misery, in the midst of that suffering, in the midst of that sickness, we have to always remember that Christ is the ultimate victor. Christ is the ultimate savior and that Christ is the divine physician, who one day, whether in this life or the next, will heal us.

We are always invited to pray for the Lord's intervening presence in our suffering and to know there is indeed healing that he provides. But this is often carried out over time so let us remember when in the white heat of suffering that a clay pot sitting in the sun will always be a clay pot. It has to go through the white heat of the furnace to become porcelain.

When we have this perspective we can discover in our suffering that God is allowing us to be shaped down here so we will fit up there.