

## ***Homily for January 10<sup>th</sup> 2017***

Today we begin reading through the Letter to the Hebrews at weekday Masses through the month of January. This is an amazing letter and one that is also difficult to understand because it takes as a given a deep understanding of the Old Testament and assumes things the original readers would know that are not readily apparent to those of us living so far removed from the writer and his circumstances.

This being said, it is a letter we can understand and when we apply it to our lives can have a greater realization of what the Incarnation means for us today.

In this evening's reading there is a close association between suffering and human dignity. We often can conclude that suffering is indicative of either God's non-existence or God's carelessness. Many conclude that suffering proves that God does not exist and is completely absent from the world and so they are atheists. Others would agree there is a God but suffering leads them to conclude that God does not care for us and is absent from the world.

Enter then the writer to the Hebrews who takes the theme of suffering very seriously but also takes to heart the centrality of Jesus Christ to help us make sense of suffering.

In chapter 2:18 the writer tells us:

***For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.***

Jesus is able to assist us in our temptation and suffering because he knows firsthand what it is to suffer.

A poem called the Long Silence captures poignantly the theme of Jesus suffering.

At the end of time, billions of people were seated on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, not cringing with cringing shame - but with belligerence.

"Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?".... Before God can be qualified to be our judge, He must endure what we have endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man.

Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind.

Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die so there can be no doubt he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved.

For suddenly, all knew that God had already served His sentence.

Today's text from Hebrews says:

***For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.***

Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation by means of his suffering. Hebrews wants us to know that when we look to Jesus the thing that is most visible is his suffering. We see the one who was truly made a little lower than the angels, even though he is the one who in the beginning created the angels.

Human dignity, the theme at the centre of psalm 8, which we both read and is quoted in Hebrews chapter 2 is aligned with the suffering of Jesus. The writer says that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers. A filial bond that is made stronger says the writer through suffering. A theme further emphasized in the last verse of today's reading where the writer quotes psalm 22:

***"I will proclaim your name to my brethren,  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."***

Psalm 22 is the one that begins with those famous words: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me" and is the psalm Jesus prays from the cross. Hebrews wants us to realize that there is a special way that in our suffering we experience what it means to be brothers and sisters of Jesus. For the Christian suffering creates a special bond where we can know Jesus more intimately.

What a different perspective from the atheist or agnostic. A perspective rooted in the heart of biblical anthropology that affirms the innate dignity of every person, especially in their suffering.