

Homily for September 27th 2016

Job 3:1–3, 11–17, 20–23

Psalm 88:2–8

Luke 9:51–56

Today's Old Testament reading expresses the deep sense of futility people can experience when encountering intense and unremitting suffering.

I have a friend who has just finished writing a book entitled: "Deliver us from Evil". It contains the most horrific chronicling of child abuse I have ever read or heard of. Ron's abuse went far beyond his childhood years and into adolescence and adult life. Repeatedly he experienced the sense of feeling like the walking dead. Ron is now a man in his sixties, who courageously with the grace, and God and caring people, is working heroically through his suffering and coming ever more into a place of freedom.

Reading his story has made real for me the fact that at times life can be characterized by such unremitting suffering because people can be subjected to premediated and calculating evil. It can be so desperate that with Job they cry out:

***let the day perish wherein I was born,
and the night which said,
'A man-child is conceived.'¹
¹¹ "Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?
¹² Why did the knees receive me?
Or why the breasts, that I should suck?
¹³ For then I should have lain down and been quiet;
I should have slept; then I should have been at rest,²***

Now it is important to mention that this death wish comes at the beginning of Job. This is chapter 3 of 42 chapters. The book that will unfold before us will tell the story of a man who tirelessly wrestles with God and his friends to come to making sense of what is on the surface seemingly so senseless.

Job's experience can lead people to conclude with today's psalmist:

***I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit;
I am a man who has no strength,
⁵ like one forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,***

¹ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Job 3:3). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

² *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Job 3:11–13). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

*like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
⁶You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.³*

Scriptures like this affirm for us that life can be so alienating that we can feel like we are in the darkest pit.

It is when we are able to both recognize from our own experience and see in the experience of others a soul deeply anguished that increasingly our lives can be conformed to the one who experienced the fullness of unremitting evil, our Lord Jesus Christ.

When this happens, God raises up people like St. Vincent de Paul. Ordained at the age of 20 in 1601, he died on this day in 1660, at the age of 79. He said that by temperament he was a very irascible person, something even his friends admitted. He said that apart from the grace of God he would have been “hard and repulsive, rough and cross”. However he became a tender and affectionate man, very sensitive to the need of others. He worked among the poor of Paris, establishing hospitals and forming church communities of compassion. His life was a direct response to the unremitting and terrible suffering he saw.

Listen to his words on this:

We should strive to keep our hearts open to the suffering and wretchedness of other people, and pray continually that God may grant us a spirit of compassion which is truly the spirit of God.

My friend Ron’s story is a testimony to how redemptive such compassion can be, even in the face of evil meted out for decades by one’s own mother.

St Vincent de Paul responded with unremitting compassion and mercy when people cried out like Job and the Psalmist in the face of unremitting evil and suffering.

May his compassion inspire us to hear the cry of the suffering with compassion, mercy and tangible care.

³ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 88:4–6). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.