



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year B-October 17<sup>th</sup> 2021

***Readings: Isaiah 53: 10-11, Psalm 32, Hebrews 4: 14-16,***

***Mark 10: 35-45***

‘To suffer is as human as to breathe’ – thus the greatest modern philosopher, Professor Albus Dumbledore, to the hero of our age, Harry Potter. The Prof has a point. As indeed does the writer who put these words into the mouth of Fredreich Nietzsche, ‘To live is to suffer. To survive is to find meaning in the suffering.’

Suffering is the great mystery of human existence. Very few get to the gates of death without enduring some form of suffering. It seems to be in man’s physical and psychic DNA. And, quite understandably, we will go to extravagant lengths to avoid it. If there was a vote FOR suffering, I suspect that there would be a very low turnout. (I always find myself inwardly wincing when the time comes round to read about St. Ignatius’ enthusiasm for his martyr fate in the arena.) Yet, in many ways, we are spoiled. With our pharmacopeia of drugs and, until recently, the absence of war, plague and famine within our borders, we have largely avoided the all too common lot of man – to perish swiftly, early, brutally and without relief. Curiously this has made us ungrateful. Far from thanking God for our blessings, the secular society pauses only to blame the God they otherwise do not believe in. Any suffering is seen as a proof of either his malice or his absence.

This has never been the Judeo-Christian view. Indeed it is no accident that the central image of our Faith is the undeserved and redemptive suffering of Christ on the Cross and the heart of our worship is the representation of that sacrifice in the mysterium of the Mass.

The human condition of suffering is not an infliction by either an unjust god or the natural consequence of an indifferent evolutionary natural process of elimination. In Christian understanding it is a natural consequence of the Fall of Man. Our exile from the Paradise for which we were made is the upshot of our breach of contract with our Creator. The result of sin is suffering and death. Nor is that restricted to the obviously and spectacularly guilty. The lessons of human history demonstrate that, in addition to the natural inheritance of suffering common to Man, Man himself becomes a dab hand at inflicting the most abominable cruelties on his fellow man – and not least the innocent. Sin festers the souls of the sons and daughters of Satan, and breeds more suffering.

How we respond to that suffering, deal with it as it examines us, is at the heart of the response of faith. By taking on our humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, God Himself has taken on the burden of sin and suffering and transformed our destiny thereby. As fully God and fully Man, Jesus re-presents us to the Father having defeated Man's last enemy. Our hope then lies in our complete incorporation into that same suffering, crucified, risen, ascended and glorified body. That is the very grace of God at work and the process of redemption that is the mainspring of our Faith.

It is beautifully summed up thus in the 4th Preface for Sundays in the Missal: 'By his birth He brought renewal to humanity's fallen state, by His suffering He cancelled out our sins. By His rising from the dead He has opened the way to eternal life and, by ascending to you, O Father, has unlocked the gates of Heaven.'

By the magnificent grace of God, our sins are cancelled. By repentance and forgiveness in Christ, the beatific vision may be restored and our original destiny – to dwell in the Presence in the Paradise of God – regained. But it is not a ‘zero sum game’. We must play our part. The absolution of the blood of the sacrifice of Christ sets us free to face up to the consequences and costs of our sins, both personal, corporate and societal. This involves our necessary solidarity in suffering. We have to endure the judgement as well as the mercy.

So Man has to repent to receive the mercy of God, which preserves him from eternal damnation, but he must still be subject to the temporal justice that his sin merits. In our suffering we are playing our part in that glorious equation of justice, mercy and love. We offer our suffering, therefore, in accompaniment to and solidarity with the supreme offering of the sinless One, Christ Jesus the Son of God. Far from being pointless, our suffering has profound meaning if we will but embrace it as part of the salvific journey into the Presence. After all, what we do not suffer here in the flesh for our sins, we will endure in the cleansing fire of the purification, which awaits all but the perfect, after death and prepares us for life in the Eternal Presence. (But more of Purgatory another time).

And when we suffer unjustly that can be, in the old saying, ‘offered up’, alongside the Sacrifice of Christ, for others. Our suffering, rightly understood and embraced, is never in vain. For our inspiration always and ever, we look to the Crucified – as St Paul says, ‘I have determined to know only Christ and Him crucified’. And herein lies a further clue. In extremis, some are granted a vision of the future life and they are most fortunate. Others enter a darkness so deep and so obscuring that they can no longer see the Cross. For the faithful that is not to be a source of despair but of profound hope. For the nearer we are to the Cross the less we can see. When we are so close that we are hanging with Our Lord, we can no longer see the Cross at all for we are on it and may pray the words

of the Psalm of the Crucifixion, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' That is not the cry of an unbeliever but the passionate yearning of the soul for the Eternal Presence. It is part of the redemptive suffering. It is part of our longed for solidarity with the Saviour. We do not enjoy suffering but if we know its purpose and are prepared to embrace the divine purpose realised in the Cross of Christ, we will never be overwhelmed by the fashionable and suicidal sense of the pointlessness of our existence and we will never despair of the hope of glory. St Paul again:

'For it has been given to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake'. Gift and offering. Omnia pro Jesu.