



Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time B October 21, 2018

- ◆ Dealing with difficult verses in Scripture
- ◆ Taking on the sufferings of others
- ◆ Implications of Jesus humanity
- ◆ Servant leadership

Today's first reading begins with the words: "*The Lord was pleased to crush (his servant) in infirmity.*" This verse and similar ones in the Bible could leave us with a pretty nasty and cruel image of God. After all, who needs a God who takes delight in crushing us with suffering—especially if we are trying to live good lives, as was the servant in our first reading. Verses like this impress on us the vital importance of reading the Bible with the help of study guides.

So what can we say about the above verse? We need to know that what *pleased* God was not the suffering that his faithful servant endured at the hands of others, but rather his *faithfulness to God in the midst of suffering*. The servant was pleased to be faithful to his mission even if it meant suffering and pain. In turn, it pleased God to use the servant's suffering to bring good to many people.

It is easy to see how the early Christians saw in this suffering servant of Isaiah the figure of the suffering Christ. In the same way, we can say that the cruel suffering of Christ did not give pleasure to God. What pleased God was Jesus' willingness to endure such suffering in the process of carrying out his mission.

In a similar way, we can say that God is not pleased when any of us is crushed with some type of suffering. But he is very pleased when, with his grace, we keep faith in him and even allow our suffering to transform us into the likeness of the suffering Christ—which is easier said than done. But it happens all the time, especially in marital relationships. Some spouses suffer immensely during their marriage and in the process of raising their children. Such suffering has the potential to make them better—or bitter. It usually takes tremendous cooperation with God's grace to allow our suffering to transform us in a positive way, rather than in a negative way.

Taking on the suffering of others

The servant in today's first reading was praised because of his willingness to carry the sufferings of others, just as Christ would take on our sufferings, and just as Martin Luther King was willing to take on the misery of his people and the sins of racial prejudice.

Commenting on the first reading, Patricia Sanchez writes:

C.S. Lewis married quite late in life, and in his marriage he found a great and fulfilling love. In his essay in Light on C.S. Lewis, friend Nevill Coghill recalls a time when he was at their home and saw Lewis look across the quadrangle at his wife, Joy. "It's funny," Lewis said then, "having at 59 the sort of happiness that most men have in their twenties... 'Thou has kept the good wine til now.'"

A severe case of cancer cut Joy's life and their marriage short less than four years after their wedding. After Joy died, Lewis told Coghill that he had had the privilege of sharing her pain. "You mean," asked Coghill, "that the pain left her and you felt it for her in your body?" "Yes," answered Lewis, "in my legs. It was crippling. But it relieved hers."

Some might say that Lewis' experience of taking on the burden of his beloved wife's pain is not unlike the experience of the Isaian suffering servant. However, Lewis accepted the burden of one woman's suffering. Jesus, in whose person and through whose mission the Isaian songs were realized, took the burden of all of humankind's sin and suffering and bore it up, in silence, in love, in forgiveness. Through his vicarious and sacrificial offering, all have been set in right relationship with God.

(In case you are interested, C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity* is regarded by many as one of the very best introductions to Christianity for unbelievers—which Lewis was for many years.)

Reflection Questions:

Have you ever taken on the sufferings of another? If so, how was that experience for you?

How belief in the humanity of Christ has implications for our relationship with God and Jesus

Today's second reading from Hebrews is also very important when it comes to the image of God that we may carry within us. If the opening verse of the first reading could easily leave us with a negative image of God, today's second reading should give us a very positive image of God. Part of the reading says:

*We do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but one who has been tested in every way,
yet without sin.
So let us confidently approach the throne of grace
to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.*
Hebrews. 4:14-16

As Christians, we believe that Jesus is both divine and human. Some people may think of Jesus as only a great prophet and teacher and not as the divine Son of God. Others may lose sight of his humanity. Some of us may be so caught up in the divinity of Christ that we may only pay lip service to his *humanity*.

Taking the *humanity* of Christ seriously is very important to our relationship with God or Jesus. In times of suffering, it is easy enough for us to think that God is aloof and distant from our painful situation or that he does not understand our pain. This is why it is very important for us to be aware that we believe in a God who is *fully human*, a God who, during his public life here on earth, was tested in every way that we are. There is *nothing* in our human experience that is foreign to Jesus. He "has been there." As a woman, you might say that Jesus never had breast cancer or any kind of cancer for that matter. But we know he suffered terribly—physically, mentally, and spiritually—during his public years on earth. Because he is a man of *incredible compassion*, he can identify with any pain and suffering that we may endure.

Jesus' humanity also means that he can relate with our *weaknesses* and *sinful tendencies* even though he himself remained without sin. To believe that Jesus was *not* tempted in every way that we are, is to lack true Catholic faith. Jesus' temptations in the desert which had to do with greed, wrong use of power, self-grandeur, etc., were *real*; otherwise, they would not have been temptations. Later on in his public ministry, we can assume that Jesus probably struggled with doubts and fears. At times, he might have wanted to quit his ministry and return to the quiet, simple life of Nazareth. He might even have been tempted to punch those Pharisees who totally rejected him and tried to trip him

up when he taught the people. As we struggle with weaknesses, sins, and darkness in our journey, it is important to remember that our God is "someone who has been there." He truly understands and empathizes with our every struggle, weakness, doubt, and sinful tendencies. Hence, we can "approach him with confidence," as our second reading states. Isn't that good news!

The challenge for each of us is to truly believe in our hearts and not just in our heads that our God *is* fully human, that the God we pray to is not aloof and distant but one who fully appreciates *and* empathizes with our *sufferings, weaknesses, struggles* and *sinful tendencies*. When we ponder on the *humanity* of Jesus, we are reflecting on how he is *like* us. When we contemplate on his *divinity*, we are reflecting on how he is *different* from us. Focusing on the *humanity* of Christ helps us to be aware that our God is one who can *empathize* with our every pain and struggle. Focusing on the *divinity* of Christ helps us to know that we are relating to someone who can *help us* deal with our sufferings and struggles. We need both for a balanced prayer life.

Reflection Questions:

To what extent do you fully believe in the humanity of Christ? What implications should such belief have for our relationship with God and Jesus?

The Servant Leader

In today's Gospel, James and John are seeking to secure top spots in Jesus' cabinet in his new Kingdom. Obviously, they have as yet no sense that leadership in Jesus' Kingdom no way resembles leadership in the world. One person who seems to have fully understood the concept of servant leadership is the main character in the following story:

On one occasion during the American Revolutionary War, preparations were being made for an upcoming battle. A man dressed in civilian clothes passed a corporal who was screaming orders at his men. Seeing that the soldiers were obviously exhausted from their labor, the man asked the corporal, "Why don't you help them?" "Sir," the corporal bristled as his anger rose, "I am a corporal!"

With a quick apology, the stranger took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and set to work with the soldiers. "Mr. Corporal, sir," he said when the task was completed, "whenever you need someone to help with a job, feel free to call on your commander-in-chief. I will

be happy to be of service.” With that, George Washington put on his coat and left. Whether his motivation was gospel-driven or not, Washington understood that those who aspire to greatness or rank first among others must serve the needs of all.

Continuing her reflections on today’s Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Incidents like this one continue to surprise because the message of today’s liturgy has yet to find a realistic foothold in our society. Who among us looks for greatness in small places or within menial ministries? In discussing this issue, Roland J. Faley (Footprints on the Mountain, Paulist Press, New York 1994) observed that Christ’s teaching on Christian authority is clear and forthright. Often we are quite capable of developing elaborate theses on issues about which Christ has little to say, and yet we pass so glibly over other teachings that are direct and unequivocal. There is a timeless quality in Jesus’ lesson on ambition, authority and service; perhaps this is so because the problem is ever with us.

Even our language betrays hearts unchanged and unresponsive to Jesus’ challenges. We refer to people being “elevated” to high office; successful people are said to “move in higher echelons” or in “upper circles.” Ambitious people “work their way up the corporate ladder” and manage to live high above others in penthouse suites. Women and/or minority executives, whose ambitions are stifled by prejudice, are said to have collided with a glass ceiling. Throughout human history, from the time of the mythical tower of Babel, people have equated greatness with “climbing to the top” and “making a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4).

How then do we reconcile these ingrained attitudes with Jesus’ teachings? To whom do we look for an example? The George Washington’s and Mother Teresa’s among us are few and far between. The challenge of today’s liturgy is that we take time to look once again at the one in whose name we have gathered here...that we quiet ourselves in order to hear his teaching repeated in our midst... And then, that we look inward and allow the Spirit of truth to help us to bridge the gap between the call of the gospel and the reality of our lives. Only when each of us consents to do this will all of us be able to

grow toward the greatness which expresses itself in service.

If you ever feel that I am using my position of authority and power in a way that is contrary to the Gospel, please do me a favor by letting me know. We in authority can sometimes be blind to how we come across to others.

Reflection Questions:

Assuming that you are the one who holds authority of some kind in your family, ministry or work place, how do you think you exercise it? Do you tend to wield power over others, or do you seek to exercise authority or leadership as outlined above or in today’s Gospel?

Bernie Siegel, M.D., famous for his work with cancer patients, says: “Show me a patient who is able to laugh and play, who enjoys living, and I’ll show you someone who is going to live longer. Laughter makes the unbearable bearable and a patient with a well-developed sense of humor has a better chance of recovery than a stolid individual who seldom laughs.”

Chuckle

A mother was making pancakes for her two hungry sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. As the first pancake reached a golden brown, the boys began to argue over who would get it. The mother, seeing a teaching moment, said, “If Jesus were here, he would say, ‘Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’” Kevin promptly turned to his younger brother and said, “Ryan, you be Jesus.”

Have a blessed week,

