

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Feb 4th 2015

At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain,
yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:11)

There been times when I thought I couldn't last for long.

But now I think I'm able to carry on.

A change gon' come.

Oh yes it will. (Sam Cooke)

Suffering can fall on us like a thief in the night: cancer spreads, jobs are cut, the drought worsens, depression returns. In this long night, existence is pared down to essentials. We grip the rock and try to hold on. In darkness our prayer is a cry of the heart. As light returns, we are not the same. A change has come. God is nearer and compassion is more real. There is goodness arising from our loss. I give thanks for my new heart open to the world.

Sometimes suffering is chosen. The 600 persons who first stepped onto the bridge in Selma, Alabama, 50 years ago to march to the state capital to secure voting rights saw the police massed for an assault. They "resisted to the point of shedding blood." In his memoir, John Lewis recalls Bloody Sunday and the discipline arising from taking action and from time spent in jail. He learned faith in the spirit that moves in history and faith in their enemies' capacity for change. The long struggles for justice teach patience and to "strive for peace with everyone."

It is tempting to see suffering as punishment. Thomas Aquinas rejects this notion. To suffer is evil and we must seek to relieve it whenever possible. But suffering is not separable from human existence. To seek perfection and fully embrace his humanity even Jesus suffers. Returning to his village, his spirit droops in the face of sarcasm and doubt. His carping neighbors refuse to listen and readjust their expectations. From the "bitter root" of cynicism nothing grows. Without faith, our vision narrows; we speak but "our feet do not move." As we open to love, the isolation ebbs. In the company of God and others, we become real.

When his wealthy parents surrounded him with pleasures, the young man was depressed. When the painted windows opened and he saw the four sights--persons aging, sick, poor, and dying--he learned compassion. The Buddha is always smiling.

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