

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jul 5th 2015

Suffering is part of the human condition. Suffering is a key experience of Paul's life.

In today's reading three times Paul asks the Lord Jesus to remove a particularly bothersome suffering – a “thorn in the flesh.” The actual “thorn” is not certain; some surmise that Paul had a vision problem hindering his ministry and so asks Jesus to remove it.

Jesus' reply to Paul is significant for Paul -- and for all believers. Jesus does indeed hear Paul's prayer and speaks directly to him, “My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness.” Not the answer Paul expected or wanted!

But Paul does hear Jesus and responds simply and humbly, “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.”

This encounter with Jesus becomes the foundation of Paul's dealing with subsequent suffering. Paul is never hesitant to recount the sufferings he experiences; nor is he hesitant to witness to the power of Jesus experienced through them – “for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

In the Letter to the Romans he catalogues suffering and concludes with an exhortation to persecuted Christians in Rome, “I am convinced that neither death nor life . . . nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul's lesson to believers is clear: we as disciples of Jesus should not expect that Jesus will shield us from suffering; rather we should expect that our weakness can become the occasion for experiencing the power of Jesus.

I have always been scandalized by preachers – and there are many – who claim that following Jesus exempts believers from suffering and guarantees a long life full of health and material prosperity.

These preachers belie the witness of Paul.

And they belie the witness of Jesus himself!

Today's Gospel recounts Jesus' experience returning home to his native place and teaching in the synagogue. All his listeners “took offense at him.” The Gospels then recount Jesus' progressive rejection, rejection leading to crucifixion and death – and to eventual transformation and resurrection through the power of his most dear Father!

Jesus is our savior and redeemer! His message is central to dealing with our suffering. Today's readings ask us to reflect on whether we have heeded Paul's witness and brought our sufferings to Jesus – all our sufferings -- trusting that in our personal weakness the power of Jesus can be manifested.

Isn't this the heart of the good news of the Gospel?

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