

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Nov 14th 2017

“But the souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them.” (WIS 2:23-3:9)

Not long ago, my daughter brought home two pieces of art she made at preschool, one of which was accompanied by her introductory question, “Why are they throwing him in a hole?” Having not yet seen her artwork nor been offered any context to accompany this question, I looked at the picture she had colored and saw it was of Joseph being ambushed by his brothers; indeed, being thrown into a hole (GN 37). For her and her three-year-old brain, this scene begged the same question the most sage among us ask: why? And with regard to the subject of suffering, no less.

Why is there suffering in the world? And more perplexing, perhaps, why do the just suffer? History and fiction both are replete with figures and characters who are just yet also suffer. Joseph, from the above story could fit this mold, as can fictional characters: Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, or Judah Ben-Hur from *Ben-Hur*, to name just a few of many more.

One scene from the 1959 film *Ben-Hur*, in particular, stands out to me after reading today’s readings. Prior to this scene, Judah Ben-Hur has been wrongfully accused of a crime and separated from his mother and sister, fearing for their safety and assuming the worst fate. While marching, shackled to other slaves, the forced march stops in a small village with a well. As his fellow slaves grasp and gasp for even a drop of water in their exhaustion, Judah is passed over and overcome now not only by his mental anguish at the fate of his family but also by physical suffering. As he lies on the dusty earth, both his body and his spirit collapsed, a hand appears that wipes his face and lifts his head to drink. Perhaps you know this scene.

As human beings we have the capacity to experience joy, suffering, and everything between these two extremes. The greatest joy can be ambushed by the most profound suffering without a moment’s notice. Though today’s Gospel may not mention suffering by name, it may nonetheless offer some insight as to how we should proceed amidst it. Just as the “unprofitable servants” (LK 17:10), we are obliged to honor God by our service to Him. In the words of Rev. Basil Moreau, founder of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, we are always “to make God known, loved, and served” whatever our suffering. And what does God promise to the just who uphold this call? No torment shall touch them.

After Judah is held and helped by these hands and looks into the eyes of the one to whom they belong (it is Jesus), his suffering and present circumstance still remain, however the torment has left him. “But they are in peace...Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed, because God tried them and found them worthy of Himself” (WIS 3:3, 5). Perhaps Joseph experienced something similar. The names of his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, may attest to this as they mean, respectively, “God has made me forget entirely my troubles and my father’s house” and “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (GN 41:51-52).

May we, too, honor God knowing that he holds us in the palm of His hand.

