

Dear Friends,

You may have had it said to you by others in the Church, as I have, that God will never give you more suffering than you can bear. To which I reply, Thank you very much, I would prefer it if he did not give me any! But I do not believe that God does "give" us suffering if that means cause it to happen to us. A God of universal love and compassion would surely not want to do that. What I do believe is that whatever happens to us - whether it is good, bad or just ordinary - God is there with us in it.

I was once visiting a young man in hospital who was laid up with a broken leg after falling from a ladder at work. He belonged to a Christian sect whose leader had been to see him and had told him that with God nothing ever happens without a purpose. The young man was getting himself into quite a state trying to work out what the purpose was. Had God caused the accident to happen? If so what was he seeking to tell the man? Had he done something to offend God and provoke this treatment? I tried to tell him that it was nothing to do with God, it was an accident, the sort of thing that will happen in this sort of world. It was not caused by God or anyone. I did also suggest, however, that if he could believe God was with him in his situation in the hospital, alongside him, loving him in this time, that might have helped him to come through it and resume his life afterwards, maybe even strengthened by the experience.

If we are realistic about it we will have to admit that there is suffering of some kind in most people's lives: illness, accidents, bereavement, rejection in love, losing our job - most of us will encounter some or all of these in the course of our lifetime. A quick definition of suffering is 'whenever we are not in control,' and as we saw a few weeks ago we do not control large areas of our life and our world. That is hard for us to accept, it causes suffering, but it does not mean that something is going wrong or that God is making these things happen to teach us something - it is simply the way it is in a world like this. There is, however, a deeper level at which suffering is necessary for us if we are to enter into our inheritance as God's people.

What makes us Christians is not so much what we believe about Christ or what we do to express our beliefs about him - important as these are - it is more a matter of what we *are*, people who are created to share in the human/divine life that is in Christ. Saint Paul regularly uses that little phrase *in Christ* to sum up our nature as people following the way of Christ. For Christ it was necessary to suffer and die in order to be reborn, to rise to eternal life, and so it must be for us, there is no other way. If we wish to be resurrected into eternal life, we must first suffer and die: the grain of wheat has to 'die' in the ground in order to bear fruit. Suffering, therefore, is not a terrible mistake or accident, it is the essential stage through which we must pass to come to our destination in the kingdom of God. It is way we learn to let go of our desire to be in control, which entails emptying ourselves of that desire.

Jesus had to empty himself of his divine nature as the second person of the Trinity in order to prepare the way for us, his human brothers and sisters. This is how an ancient text puts it, what is believed to be an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul in the second reading of this Sunday's Mass:

*His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God,  
but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and become as human beings are;  
and being as all people are he was humbler yet,  
even to accepting death, death on a cross.  
But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names,  
so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,  
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus  
and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord  
to the glory of God the Father.*

The self-emptying which Jesus had to undergo begins at his birth, continues through his earthly life when he is so often misunderstood or rejected, and culminates in his Passion and death on the cross - so this text is read at the Mass of Palm Sunday at the start of Holy Week. By letting go of his divine nature and power Jesus voluntarily loses his control and puts himself at the mercy of his enemies. In doing so he is carrying out God's will, and humanly this is a struggle for him. As he says, 'Father, let this cup pass from me; but let thy will be done, not mine.' When we who are in Christ likewise suffer and lose control we can believe that we too are carrying out God's will for us, which is not to remain in this state but come through it to the glory of the resurrection life. If we can believe that it is indeed God's will then perhaps we will find the trust and faith to let go and give ourselves into his hands, not blindly but knowing that this is what will be best for us.

I often turn to the letters of the Benedictine John Chapman, who was abbot of Downside in Somerset and died in 1933. He was devoted to a spiritual classic by an 18th century French writer, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, which teaches that whatever happens to us at any moment God is there and his will is being done, so we should enter into it not in a spirit of resignation, submitting because we cannot do anything else, but actively willing it ourselves because it is God's will. Chapman insisted that this attitude should apply above all at the moment of death and the fellow-monk who was with him on the day of his death reminded him that he had used to say this:

"Yes," he said at length, after a long silence. "That is true, quite true. If God sees best for me to die, what in the world should one wish to live for?"

We might like to think we will have that degree of faith when it comes to the moment of our death, the ultimate self-emptying we are called to, but it certainly begins with our practising letting go here and now while we have the chance and the more we can practice it the better prepared we will be for that moment. So whatever you are able to do in the way of letting go of your own thoughts and desires will always be a good way of prayer. It may be sitting in silence attending to a single word or phrase, looking at Christ in the tabernacle or on the cross,

listening to music, enjoying the beauty of nature - and doing all this with as much self-forgetful attentiveness as you can. Above all be practical and relax into it, do not make it a struggle. Abbot Chapman in his letters has some sound practical advice on prayer and many will know his familiar saying: Pray as you can and do not try to pray as you can't.

The date of this Sunday, 27 September, is the feast of St. Vincent de Paul, patron of the parish. We know him best for his great desire to care for the poor because he saw in them the face of Christ. He writes, 'If you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will see that they take the place of God the Son, who chose to be poor.' Choosing to be poor is part of the self-emptying which Jesus took on and which we too are called to undergo. In doing so we may be reminded, as St. Vincent teaches us, of the overriding importance of caring for those who are materially poor - the constant duty of the Church throughout the ages.

*St. Vincent de Paul, pray for us.*

Wishing you every blessing in the week ahead, Fr. Robin  
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