

Right Suffering
6th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year C
Luke 6: 17,20-26
14 February 2010

When people ask me what period of history I would like to live in if I had the choice I am able to give an immediate answer – right now will do just fine. The clincher for me is that modern medicine has got so good, and that pain control has become highly effective in most cases.

Pain is usually a highly useful warning signal that something is not right with the body, but getting more specific than that can be hard to do. Pain is such a subjective thing, and people's ability to bear it often varies widely. What is more there are different kinds of pain. I may be pretty stoic when it comes to physical pain, but may then have little capacity to put up with emotional pain. Others may be terrified of the dentist's chair, but can endure rejection and abandonment with a stiff upper lip.

Also chance psychological factors can raise or lower our ability to tolerate pain. A palliative care doctor once told me then when his wife had their first child she called for every drug under the sun to get her through the ordeal. Later she felt ashamed of this, and when their second child was on the way went through lots of antenatal psyching up so as to be fully conscious when the baby arrived, and so as to be not doping down the baby with what was in her blood stream. The trouble was that the birth was not straight forward, and when the baby doctor said to her, "I am afraid it is going to be a long labour, prepare your self," her resistance and her courage melted away, and she called for an epidural.

Our theme this morning is suffering, and that involves more than just pain. If you are a mental health consumer, living in a bed sit, depressed about your reduced circumstances, and plagued by psychotic symptoms, then you are experiencing suffering on a broad front. If you are a Haitian orphan living in the rubble of your former home, scavenging for food, living in constant fear of marauding gangs of thugs, then you know what suffering is.

But suffering is served up in less dramatic ways as well, closer to home. People who have never met the right marriage partner and who don't enjoy living on their own, women who long to have children but who can't conceive, and elderly people who are cut off from human contact by irreversible deafness or blindness. In a 101 ordinary ways people come to feel that life has not turned out the way they hoped or expected.

The New Testament, though it promises abundant life, has many odd examples of what that might mean. Many of the disciples seem to

have ended up far from home and family, and meeting a violent end at the hands of Roman executioners. These were people who had gone looking for trouble, and they had found it.

But then the early Christians had high curiosity value because of three behavioural traits that made them regarded as oddities by their pagan neighbours. They rejoiced at funerals of their own, considering that the departed had gone to a better place. They did not expose children to die who had physical or mental defects, a common practice in the Roman Empire. And they shunned divorce if they possibly could, and had high standards of sexual morality. This did not seem like a recipe for the good life to the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. And when they periodically tried to stamp Christianity out they found that some Christians were prepared to die rather than renounce their faith.

In a nutshell, what was different about these people was that they accepted suffering as part of their religious witness. Or rather they saw a way through suffering that believed that if it was accepted in the right spirit it could become a road into the Kingdom. After all they did not believe that our here and now life is all there is to life.

Let me be clear about this – Christianity is not a religion that glorifies masochistic and deliberately sought suffering. Hairshirts and flagellators should be left behind in the darker regions of the Middle Ages where they belong. The healing miracles of Jesus, and the mission hospitals set up by Christian missionaries wherever they have gone, show that Christianity is interested in pushing back the frontiers of suffering wherever it encounters it. After all, in a God's eye view of our world suffering is on a par with sin and death as expressions of a gone wrong world. It will not be there any more when the world is rebalanced, and made right by the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Yet on the other hand there is such a thing as right suffering, an acceptance of some kinds of existential distress as an inevitable part of life on this side of the Kingdom, that can be useful in the unfolding life of grace. Paul, for instance, writes about a thorn in the flesh that was given to him to keep him humble, a kind of counter balance to the visions he had received of the inner life of God. He doesn't say what this humbling limitation was, but it was obviously something that didn't go away as a result of miraculous intervention or skilled medical attention.

This of course puts us at odds with our surrounding culture, which as a result of the great gains made by medical science, believes that suffering is always wrong, and that extraordinary means are justified to prevent it. This belief is at the core of the arguments used to justify euthanasia, for instance. It is why doctors sometimes recommend

treatment regimes for the dying that buy a little more time at the cost of a degraded kind of existence that really isn't life that is worth having. After thirty years of pastoral experience I have made a mental note to ask some very hard questions, and not to automatically say yes, to end of life treatment regimes for me that would be of the nature of bombing the village to save it. Sometimes it is better to die gracefully without radical interventions and multiple therapies.

The downwind consequences of living in a culture that can't and won't accept suffering are considerable. I remember the wise words of a lifeline counsellor at a seminar on youth suicide who talked about the way many parents shield their children from any kind of distress – so you don't want to go to the school ball because you would feel embarrassed, that's fine, don't go – doctor, I insist that you give my child an anaesthetic before performing this small procedure. The result is that our young people can enter their teens and young adulthood with little experience of putting up with emotional pain, so that when it inevitably comes it seems overwhelming, and they can draw the disastrous conclusion that even killing yourself would be better than putting up with that. It also means that we live in a society with little capacity for sacrifice. Third world insurgency movements generally reckon that they will usually prevail over western nations in a guerrilla war because their soft citizenry have no patience for the long haul. They want quick results at a cheap cost.

The Lukan antitheses remind us that we are doing people a favour when we show that there is another way of living than just aspiring to be part of the pampered, the sleek, the soft, and the suffering avoiders. "Courage mon brave," we might say to our friends and neighbours, who shrink from the cost of being human. "It's only death after all," we might say to those who are about to depart this world. "I know how to abase and how to abound" – are wise words of St Paul that we might like to keep in mind when a bit of financial and economic belt tightening is required. Luke's words can also get us out of the politics of envy. They point to the long-term reality that the powerful, the glossy, the gourmands, and the stars of this world are having their reward now. The Kingdom of God is a world of reversals where the ultimate winners and prestige carriers may well turn out to be a different cast of characters. What we see now isn't all there is.