SUFFERING: AN EVER-PRESENT REALITY

Today is the first day of Holy Week, Palm Sunday. We remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, but we are also confronted with the specter of His betrayal, His arrest, and His death on the cross. The triumph and accolades are fleeting. Jesus has a job to finish. He knew what was in store for Himself, for the people, for the Jewish leaders, and for the Romans; and He knew it was not going to be pleasant or peaceful. In fact, it would be grueling, cruel and unlike anything the world would ever seen or will see for that matter.

In just a few short days, Jesus, the one they called Master and Teacher, the one who healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of deaf, the one who drove out demons and raised the dead, would be in the crosshairs of the establishment and rejected by His own people. Jesus would experience intense physical, emotional and spiritual pain. He would go through intense suffering. The Lord would indeed suffer - disgrace, beatings and whippings, crucifixion, the abandonment by His Father, and finally death.

This historical reality should make all people uncomfortable. It reminds us of the reality of suffering itself. Suffering is part of the human experience. Everyone will suffer discomfort, disappointment, pain and loss sooner or later in this life. While pain signifies an intense unpleasant experience, suffering signifies the experience of pain and duress over a period of time.

Now let me ask you, “Does anyone like to suffer?” We sometimes joke that a person who likes to put himself in a position of suffering is a "sucker for punishment." The truth is, if you are normal, you don't like to suffer and you want to avoid it. We even pray in the Prayers of the People that we might "end our lives without suffering or reproach."

So if God is a good and loving God, why is their suffering in our world; and why does He allow His people to go through suffering? It's a good question; and like the question "Why evil?" it is one asked by most people and can cause some to lose their faith in God. In light of the fact that we are entering the most sacred week of the year and that we are preparing for Good Friday BEFORE Easter, I want to answer the question, "Why suffering?"

WHY SUFFERING?

First, we must recognize that suffering is part of God's plan for our world. That's right. It is part of God's plan because He allows it. It is not however, His intention that we suffer. In other words, God is not a cosmic killjoy who wants to take away things that give us happiness and pleasure and instead, wants the world to endure hardship, distress and pain. That is not His intention. His part of the plan but not what He desires. He desires that we have life as Jesus said in Jn. 10:10 that He came that we might have abundant life. This is also demonstrated in the garden when God gave Adam and Eve all that they needed to enjoy life and to rule the world. The entire planet was given to them. Moreover, God gave them the privilege of
being able to bring life into the world and raise children. In a real sense, Adam and Eve were co-regents with God when it came to the aspects of life God gave them. And yet, God gave them parameters to live by, rules to follow. But it was more than just rules; it was the opportunity to trust and love God in return. They had the freedom to choose to live another way, but they would have to deal with the consequences. We are free to choose. But we are not free to choose the consequences. In fact, the consequences choose for us!

And so what were the consequences? Pain in childbirth! Hard labor and effort just to get food! Rather than work being a creative and enjoyable endeavor, it became toil. Competition and conflict arose between men and women and between each other; disease and death; feelings of shame, guilt, and fear, and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness became the norm. Even nature itself became cursed. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8:22: "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now."

As a result, all suffering has at its root the fall of mankind. Sometimes people ask if there was pain in the garden. Possibly, but if so, it would serve a warning sign not to overdo it. But there was no emotional or spiritual pain. That changed after Adam and Eve chose to disobey. Both my children asked me when they were growing up, "Why did Adam and Eve have to eat the fruit in the first place and put us in this predicament?" I said that it wasn't just Adam and Eve but that we would have done the same thing. And that is the mystery of God giving us free will. But now let's return to the question of "Why suffering?"

THREE PURPOSES OF SUFFERING

The first purpose of suffering is that it confronts the world with the reality that all is not well. In other words, there is something intrinsically wrong with our world. We can experience great highs and joy at the same time experience terrible lows of great sorrow and pain. From where does it come? Sin! The sin nature, the desire to be self-centered and selfish! You say, "Wait a minute - not all suffering comes from sin, does it?"

Ultimately yes it does. First, it comes from shortsighted and bad decisions on our part, what we might call self-inflicted suffering. Second, it can come from others who inflict pain on us. Third, it is from our family background (our genes) which has been corrupted by the Fall. Think of the various illnesses that are linked to mutated genes. Fourth, suffering comes from nature itself (ie. bacteria-borne disease and, natural disasters. Ultimately, the end of all of the above is death. That is some really bad news, isn't it? And it should be. Suffering confronts us with the sin of our world, in others and in ourselves. The suffering of Jesus and His death on the cross screams out to the world that there is this problem.

You see Jesus was free from sin. He never sinned. The Bible says in Heb. 4:15, "He was tempted in every way that we are, and yet did not sin." He was tempted to take the shortcut: to go to Mt. Zion without enduring Mt. Calvary; to satisfy the flesh regardless of the consequences; to demonstrate His power and Who He really is in the face of ridicule, rejection, and rebellion. They are the temptations. He had it all but He also had to set it aside for the reason why He came.

So the very fact Jesus suffered shows us two things: 1) it shows us the evil that is in the heart of each one of us. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that the Jews or the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross.
Certainly, their leadership was responsible directly. But ultimately, we all put Him on that cross. And that is not Fr. Ward's opinion. That is the Word of God. Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrates His own love towards us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

And 2) that He is a loving God. What did we read in our lesson from Philippians 2:3-11? "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

He humbled Himself. He suffered and died to not only show how prone to evil we are but to show how loving God is. True love is selfless and sacrificial. It is willing to hurt for the sake of another. Therein lies the power and mystery of Jesus. He is unlike any human who has ever lived. Did any world religious or political leaders ever suffer the way Jesus did? Do any of the pagan deities of old actually walk the earth and suffer humiliation and death at the hands of real people? Is there anyone who has died not just because of the sins of others but for the sins of others? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding “NO!”

So the real question is not why do we suffer? The real question is why does God suffer? Think about that for a moment. Christ, totally innocent, suffered to show our sin and to demonstrate God's love for us. And so this is the second purpose of suffering - to point us to the reality that only God can remove our suffering and He has done so in His Son Jesus Christ who suffered for us.

And that leads us to the third purpose of suffering in our lives. We read in Hebrews 5:8 that Jesus "learned obedience through suffering." That is a radical statement. Do you mean that suffering produced obedience in the Son of God? I thought He already was obedient? Jesus said in Jn. 8:39, "I always do those things which please my Father." We just saw how Philippians 2:8 says that "He became obedient to the point of death." What this means is that Jesus became obedient through experience and this experience included suffering. And true obedience is to obey even when it is not comfortable or easy to obey.

Suffering is always meant to bring us back to God. The third purpose of suffering is to give us an opportunity for us to show how much we trust and love God and to allow Him to demonstrate His power in us to change us for the better and to set us free from our suffering and all for His glory. You ask, "How so?" Remember Job? He suffered tremendously but did not curse God; instead he kept trusting Him. Job said after losing his children, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!" (Job 1:21) The Bible tells us in 1 Jn. 3:16-17: “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” If we really love someone, we will be willing to experience suffering to show that love.
Think about it for a moment. True love and faith is not just doing good things when it is convenient or when it feels good. True love and faith involves sacrifice and this will include suffering. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this then one who lays down his life for his friends." When Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, that implies that it will not only not be easy it will mean suffering.

In fact, not only can suffering be a way to show forth the power of God when we reach out to others in Christ’s name who are hurting or who have hurt us; but it can produce in us godly character which is at the root of spiritual maturity.

The Apostle Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:12-16 that we shouldn't be upset for suffering if we have done wrong. However, if we have suffered for doing right we are blessed. Why? "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name."

As Jesus said in Mt. 5:11, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." And why the Apostle Paul prayed in Philippians 3:10-11: "that I may know Him (Christ) and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

The truth is that suffering has a purpose. It is meant to bring us back to God, to know that God ultimately is a good and loving God - hence the cross - and it is meant for us to show true love and faith in Christ by how we live and act towards others and how we meet the needs of those who are suffering. Finally, it is God's way of instilling in us the importance and blessing of obedience which will produce godly character. If Jesus had to be perfected in the flesh through suffering, than how much more we? If we allow God to work through us as we go through suffering, we will be that much more empowered to help others to make it through their trials.

The good news is that for the believer all suffering is only for a season. For the suffering we experience now will give way to the blessing of heaven. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." And why the Apostle John saw the incredible vision as recorded in Revelation 21:1-4: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’" And why at the end of this Holy Week we will be preparing for the celebration of Easter.

As Psalm 30:5 declares, "Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!