

Suffering and Trials Fr Michael. 21st Oct 2018

Our first reading from that poetic prophet Isaiah is such a well known passage and is part of a larger prophecy about the suffering servant. He states very clearly the offering of his life in atonement, bearing the sins of many, then when his anguish is over, 'he shall see light and be content.'

The picture in Isaiah includes mockery, derision, abuse and degradation which makes him unrecognisable, a worm and no man.

When one reads these passages, especially at a time when one doubts God's love or the cost of following Jesus, they are very valuable as they rescue us from self-pity and bring us to our right mind. It gives a sense of proportion to our trials and how little we suffer compared to the wounds and agonising death of Jesus Christ for us all. 'By his suffering, shall my servant justify many, taking faults on himself.'

Now, in the Gospel reading, Jesus is met with a request from James and John. They want to join him as a power triumvirate in heaven. They presume their friendship and respect for him comes with a reward, and they want to make sure they get their due place while things are going well.

Jesus' response is to use their request as a teaching moment for his disciples and so for each of us: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

So, James and John are looking at things the way we often do. They tend to see God as someone to be placated either through worship, or obedience, or even for having done the right thing, and they expect something in return. So, James and John are warned that the cup of suffering will be theirs. Now, so who signs up for that?

The two disciples ask to sit next to Jesus in his glory, one on his right, one on his left. But, when Jesus came into his "glory," it was not on a throne. It was on a cross, with two thieves, one on his right and one on his left.

This is the message that we are often reluctant to proclaim to the world, perhaps because we don't want to hear this message ourselves! Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world, a world redeemed, restored to God. And the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and, if need be to suffer like Jesus.

Did the disciples really know what they were signing up for when they said they could drink the cup and be baptised with what Jesus would be baptised into? No, of course not. They hadn't witnessed the cross at this point, they hadn't made the connection to the suffering servant and they certainly had no notion whatever about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

So Jesus says this baptism will happen, and he ends with repeating their need to serve as a servant does and therefore not to look for greatness and prestige and power.

Where does that leave us?

We realise that we have our own crosses to bear, that there will be suffering in our lives, that whenever we love - we will feel pain - through loss of love, hurt at being mistreated, separation or even cruelty. We know that at the heart of God's love is forgiveness. God forgives our sins, our faults, but he expects us to therefore forgive each other. He expects us to treat each other kindly, with respect and generosity. Not to belittle other people, not to laud it over them because we think we are clever or good with words, for that is misuse of power. We are all called to be a small version of the suffering servant. Christianity is not easy - and that is what we sign up for; because the rewards are great. When the trials are over the way is paved to eternal life. "Our only ambition should be to serve the Father as Christ did. To pass through our trials to the Father as Christ did." Amen.