

5th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR B

Once upon a time , in a faraway land, there lived an upright and blameless man called Job. He had a loving wife, seven sons and three daughters, and the largest estate in the kingdom. He never abused the power and privilege he enjoyed: he used his wealth for hospitality and his influence for helping the needy. No one who went to Job for help left disappointed. But Job's piety - and sanity - are put to the test. In a series of disasters he loses his family, his friends, his fortune, his possessions. Messengers keep coming to him to tell him tales of horror, of loss, of tragedy. Job rents his garments, shaves his head, and falls to the ground praying: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord." The only thing Job does not lose is his faith in God.

Job is then afflicted with sores, from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. His wife tells him to curse God and die, but Job keeps faith in God. The man who was described as the greatest figure in all the east is now afflicted with disaster and sickness. What has Job done to deserve such a terrible fate ? Why is he chosen to be God's victim ?

The question of human suffering, especially that of the just, was a big problem in biblical times. Still is. There are lots of people today who could identify with Job. We only need to think of all who suffer from poverty, hunger, sickness, injustice, oppression, tragedy. Remember last week we said that the people of biblical times had a different world view to our own - quite simply, in those times suffering was seen as a punishment for sin. Simple as that. Job **appeared** to be a good man – but, well, he must have been up to something on the side !!! Probably deserved everything he got !!

So what was Jesus' answer to the problem of human suffering ? Well he certainly did not accept the view that suffering was a punishment from God. God does not do evil. God does good.. What we see in the Gospel is not so much an answer to the question "why suffering?" as Jesus' response to real suffering.

And that response was a very practical one – as we see from today's Gospel. Here we see Jesus surrounded by throngs of physically and mentally sick people. And he gives himself to each of them, healing them one by one. He didn't insulate himself against human pain. He made himself totally vulnerable before the wounded and the sick.

Suffering is a lonely place. Jesus wasn't sentimental about suffering. Nor did he preach resignation as we often do. He did not like to see people suffer. Suffering was one of the evils he came to fight. He had compassion on sufferers and made them well. He cast out the devils of guilt, shame, fear and despair.... Those things that held people bound.

What we see as the **problem** of suffering became, for Jesus, an **opportunity** – an opportunity to show what God is really like. By the way he gave himself to the sick, Jesus reveals to us the compassion of God in the face of human suffering.

The suffering of others becomes an opportunity for us too. We may not be able to cure, but it is always within our power to care. And to care is such a healing thing. Just to spend time with the sufferer is in itself so very worthwhile. But it's not easy, because it means that instead of relieving someone's pain, we have to be prepared to share it.

You know, I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life when my mum died over 45 years ago. Although I'd been ordained a priest for a number of years and had "learned" in the Seminary about the pastoral care of the sick – talk about "book knowledge" – I really didn't deal with her last days very well.... She was mainly unconscious after suffering a serious stroke and I thought there was nothing I could do. So I hardly stayed. Just fleeting visits during the fortnight she was in Frankston Hospital before she died. Even today I feel little bits of guilt – and even a kind of envy - when I hear about folk just "sitting with" dying relatives. It took a long while to forgive myself and then the biggest mistake became the greatest learning.

We come to sufferers with empty hands. What can we do for them ? We can use those empty hands for comforting. All they ask is that we do not desert them. That we stand our ground at the foot of the cross as Mary did on Calvary. Simply to be there – that in some ways is the hardest thing of all. The one thing the sufferer longs for is in our power to give – human warmth. A person can be healed without being cured.

And our own suffering ? Suffering is an unavoidable element of the human condition. Nevertheless, the road of suffering is a narrow and dark one..... for some it's **very** narrow and **particularly** dark. It's perhaps a great comfort to us to know that Jesus went down the road, and went

down it to the end. And it's not the same since he travelled it. His own journey of pain and suffering shows us that though it leads to Calvary, it doesn't end there. It ends at Easter. So for Christians suffering becomes an opportunity to share in Christ's Passion in the hope of sharing in his Easter victory. It is that trust and that hope that might sustain us even in the darkest hours.