

Lent 5B: Jer 31:31-34, 119:9-16, Heb 5:5-14, Jn 12:20-33 - **Let Go and Let God**

OK hands up when we listened to the letter to the Hebrews your eyes glazed over, you thought briefly, who in earth is Melchizedek and you nodded off? Who thought like me...why do we have this reading at this time – what are those lectionary people up to? Well I decided there must be something about this letter that is important for us to know so I went back for a closer and deeper look.

What stands out is that it portrays the most human Jesus than any other New Testament letter.. Jesus was one of us as the letter (2:11) puts it, he was tempted as we are (4:15) and cried to God in tears (5:7-8). Because he is so human he is able to show us how to bear suffering, endure hostility and disregard shame. (12:1-3).

There is not much point in going on about how we shouldn't have to suffer or deal with hostility or shame because that seems to be part of being human, at least this side of the second coming. It is also part of being a Christian. When we stand for something, when we suggest that Jesus Christ does have the way to fullness of life or when we from a Christian perspective challenge the accepted norm, we are guaranteed to put someone off side. Suffering also comes to us from unexpected quarters. It is easy to see how suffering is obviously a part of the lose of close friend or relative or the pain of physical or mental illness but suffering also comes from what seems to be benign circumstances – like following the call of God in our lives, choosing to be a person of compassion and love and then having to deal with the internal struggle that initiates.

The word suffer originally comes from the latin *ferre*, which means to bear, to carry, to endure. In this sense anything that we endure, whether that is freely chosen or not, is a type of suffering. Whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, easy or not – it is. But Jesus does show us how to live fully as humans, how to do suffering, endurance if you like, and the clues are in our passage...(5:7)

The first thing is Jesus, in the days of his flesh, *“offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death”*. Or as the Message translation puts it – *“While he lived on earth, anticipating death, Jesus cried out in pain and wept in sorrow”*. Friends, this is our call and our permission to weep and rage, and pray and feel agony and loss. If Jesus, perfect human, can weep and cry and feel the depths of suffering than so can we, so must we. You don't see Jesus in this picture bottling in his feelings. You don't see him with the proverbial stiff upper lip.

He is immersed in life with all its pain. He feels it and he lets God know that's what is happening. For me, the most poignant and gut wrenching moment of the Easter story is the Gethsemane scene when Jesus is distressed, agitated and in anguish. He weeps tears of blood and begs God that he will not have to suffer, he will not have to endure. He is the most human and the most real at that moment. We are meant to be real as well, to cry and weep and know our humanness. There is nothing good about suffering, per se, but it seems to be true that some of our greatest insights, our deepest knowing, comes about through the pain and loss we feel, through the things we endure and carry through until the end. It never feels like it at the time. For it is only from our humanity, knowing our humanity that we can truly reach out to God.

Feeling our pain and hurt and reaching out to God is not the end of it. We know that Jesus was not spared. He did suffer and die. Death is as real as the suffering that often precedes it. It is an ever-present reality for us and for those we love. But the Easter story tells us that something else happened - he was glorified. Glorified – what an interesting concept. What exactly does it mean to be glorified?

Jesus uses the term in our gospel and we throw the idea around in our liturgy. Put simply, being glorified is the third stage of Christian development. The Christian life is a journey of transformation. We move from one stage to another – well that is the idea.

The scriptural words used for this process are justification, then sanctification, and finally glorification. (Rom. 8:28-30). Glorification is the completion, the perfection - the full realisation of salvation. In the Eastern Orthodox Church the term is used when their saints are canonized – they are glorified. Basically, it is the process in which God’s life fills and transforms us; in the end, I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2.20) The next verse that follows on from our Hebrews passage says – “*Let us go on toward perfection*”.

How then is it that we get from weeping and offering up tears of anguish to God to glorification and perfection? Again the clue is in the Hebrew passage: *Jesus was heard (by God) because of his reverent submission*”. Or as Jesus puts it, “*unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life*”. It is when you surrender to God and say – “*your will not my will, be done*”. It is surrendering the self, the ego, your very life to God. It is saying –I give up, I let go of my desires, my fears, myself and I say, God’s will be done. It is when we reach a place of letting go of the struggle and accepting what is. It is when we get out of the way. It is offering our lives and our wills to the care of God in reverent submission.

This is not passive submission it is reverent submission. That means we acknowledge that God is God, the God of the galaxies and universe, the God of the mountains and depths, the God of the supernova and the cells that make up all life, the God of our hearts and minds. In reverence to this God we surrender. However, we do not passively lie down and take what ever comes. We work with the reality that is before us, we work with God and God’s guidance in the present moment of feeling, of pain, of grief and suffering. Sometimes that might mean laying on the ground or falling on our knees and crying out like Jesus. Sometimes it means we stay with the difficulty so we can learn from it and what the experience will teach us.

When we surrender we give our life and our will over to the loving care and guidance of a God who wants to lead us into fullness of life. That this is difficult to do should be obvious.

We humans do not willingly surrender to the divine. Sometimes we have to be dragged kicking and screaming to the point of surrender. It was when I'd reached the depths of suffering in my life, admitted it was a mess, that I finally got on my knees, literally, and said, "OK God I give up trying to run my life, let's do it your way for a change". Up until that point I just gave lip service to doing God's will. It was like I had a board of advisors where God was just one of the advisors. I was firmly in the director's chair. I was a very post-modern kind of girl.

My point of surrender was fairly dramatic. For many people it is slow, drawn out process that is about as much fun as having a tooth pulled, in fact much worse, but for all of us it is daily journey. We need to come to the point of reverent submission over and over again. The thing is we hang on grimly to power, control and self-justification when what is on offer is perfect freedom. What is on offer is 'glorification' where we live in God and God lives in us and there is no separation. What is on offer is justice and proper relationship to creation. St Gregory of Sinai, Eastern orthodox saint, wrote that obedience to God is the first virtue we must practice for it reverses the effect of our primal separation from God. Through obedience our suffering leads us to our true home, one where Christ waits for us.

It is paradoxical that suffering and glorification go together. It is almost counter intuitive. But the model we have in Jesus is of someone who was reverently obedient. By becoming fully human, by being obedient, even unto death, he finds, and we find our true life in God. As we take these next few steps to the cross of Easter, as we come to the altar to share in God's love and communion may we surrender our lives to God and find in him our perfect freedom and home. Amen.