

SERMON FOR TRINITY 13 | 03.09.23

(Jeremiah 15: 15-21; Romans 12: 9-end; St Matthew 15: 2-end)

In the ‘good old days’ when we as a family would sit down and watch a film together, we had a kind of spoiler alert system running. So often one of the others had seen the film before and so whenever there was some bit of gruesome violence - or a medical procedure or something particularly bloody just about to happen - there would be a general warning for me to close my eyes.

I have always found pain – mental or physical – hard to cope with. The kind dentist couldn’t believe how tense I became in the chair on Thursday; nasty scenes from films still play over and over in my head and our visit to Auschwitz a few years ago was deeply, deeply troubling. I still think of it. Visiting my cousin in hospital last weekend with all the medical stuff around was really difficult and I suspect that I am, by instinct, liable to shy away from any confrontation if I get the chance.

So after our reflections last week on St Peter when Jesus told him he was going to build his Church despite his rather wobbly faith, I feel yet more empathy for him when he leaps up to Jesus’ defence when Jesus tells him that he is going to suffer and die: *God forbid it, Lord, says the over-eager Peter, this must never happen to you!*

And we all recognise this feeling: it is what my children have been doing for me for years, and we do it in all kinds of contexts: we do our utmost to protect those we love from pain and suffering. And it takes so many forms - from with-holding bad news to making sure they don’t trip over pavements. We don’t want people to be hurt.

Yet the world is full of terrible suffering and distress. Our prayers touch on it all the time: someone seriously ill, a war out of control with individual acts of terrible injustice too numerous to mention or natural calamities from hurricanes, fires, droughts and famine.

And always Peter’s cry: *God forbid it, Lord, this must never happen to you!*

So what do we make of Jesus' fierce put down when he describes his close friend as Satan? What does this Gospel story tell us about our tendency to run away from pain?

There is more than a bit of us which wonders why, if God is so loving, almighty and all-knowing, that he allows bad things to happen at all? Surely he can't want this for us? Equally we are not above wondering what we have done wrong when some calamity hits us. *What have I done to deserve ... whatever it is?* we say to ourselves.

It doesn't take much digging around the Bible to discover that pain, sin and death were never part of God's plan for us. In an earlier chapter of Romans, St Paul points directly to the Adam and Eve story – reminding us of their disobedience in the Garden of Eden and the direct consequence: *sin entered into the world through one man, and death followed because, as his descendants, we are all sinners.*

Pain and suffering are there because we live in a broken world and it is a mix of things that, in our totally unfair society, we can't control - and stuff we can control but don't. So one answer to the presence of sin and evil is to say it is there to goad us into making the world a better place to live in. St Paul again: *this world of frustration and anguish is not God's will but now that sin has entered the world he longs for that day when we will be liberated from the effects of sin and decay so that we can come to know the glorious freedom of the children of God.* Well that is all very well and good, but how is that wonderful liberation to be achieved?

Not, sadly, by closing our eyes to the reality and hoping it will go away! Instead what God expects of us, frightened as we so often are by the challenges of life, is to find ways of growing - despite the difficulties we face. As we so often say, there is nothing like a crisis to sort out the strong from the weak. If we are sensible, suffering and pain force us to stop looking for scape-goats to blame (which is our natural tendency) and to start looking into those parts of our inner selves which we so easily overlook.

Chapter 5 of Romans says: *as we know, suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character leads to hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God, through his Holy Spirit, pours out his love and his care to carry us through.*

Not that, when we are really going through the mill, we want to hear all this! We love to wallow, at least for a bit, in the woe-is-me stuff! But the title of Arthur Miller's play 'The Crucible' which described the awful storms in New England at the time of the witch trials, is a pretty accurate description of what life often feels like. All of us undergo intense times of pain and turmoil and it takes a great deal of effort not to get bitter and twisted in the process. It is like a crucible.

But after the storm has passed (and there nearly always is an afterwards) we can see how suffering is a call to hunker down, as the Americans say, and to go back to basics: can I, with the prophet Habbakuk, still say: *despite what I have been through, yet I will still rejoice in the Lord. I will thank him for all that he has given me because he has been my salvation when everything else has been taken from me.* We find the same in the book of Job who, when absolutely everything has been taken away from him, refuses to join in the blame game suggested by his erstwhile friends. In the words of Cardinal Newman: *always God knows what he is about.*

I picked up the small graphic that is on your pew sheet today in Iona when I was a student. It shows a congregation listening to the preacher who has placed a curtain over the cross, to shield them from 'the nasty bits' in the Gospel.

And of course it is bonkers. And it isn't Christianity! Christ dying on the cross wasn't just 'one of those things' best hidden but the key moment when God tells us that while pain is never good - suffering is always evil and wrong and the reasons why Jesus was crucified were always corrupt - they could still be 'redeemed' or made to serve a higher purpose.

As Fr Jacques Philippe has written: *This is the fundamental truth: God can draw good out of anything, both positive and negative. In his love and wisdom he manages to create a new world order even out of hurt and suffering. We don't know how, or even why - but our job is to trust that he knows what he is doing, and to hold on to those words in Romans: in everything God works for good with those who love him.*

Taking up our cross in life will take many forms; all of them will hurt us in one way or another – physically or emotionally. But it won't help to think that these things are some kind of punishment even if that is what the Old Testament seems to teach us.

Much better to stick with Jesus and to remember that whatever life throws at us, he walks by our side every step of the way. Better too to try to see how what seem like insuperable obstacles can so often open new doors and opportunities and often have an uncanny knack of turning our weaknesses into strengths.

It was CS Lewis (whom we talked about two weeks ago) who said, in his little book 'The Problem of Pain', that not even the worst tragedy in the world should be enough to turn us away from our good and powerful God.

To think otherwise, as Jesus said to Peter, is to be a follower of Satan, the one who encourages us to put up curtains in front of the cross in the hope that we will close our eyes and ignore the way God helps us to grow - through pain.

On reflection, I think it is high time I 'kept looking' through the difficult moments in those films...