

Suffering Rightly

(From today's Collect, Gospel, & Epistle)

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called... (1 Pe. 2: 19-21a)

I lay down my life for the sheep... (Jn. 15b)

“Give us grace that we may always... endeavor ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his holy life...” (Collect, Easter II)

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (Jn. 15:13)

How could the theme of today's Collect, Epistle and Gospel be summed up? I think it would be... "suffering rightly", and the prime example of this is the one our Lord has set for us.

Such suffering is voluntary. There are many ways that it can be easily avoided. If I carefully lay out the boundaries of my life, I can vastly reduce the discomforts and complications that involvement with others will invariably bring. If I remain single, for example, and deliberately steer clear of the great unknowns of marriage, I perhaps will succeed in crafting for myself a life sufficiently empty of risk, a risk that might entail a whole host of suffering on another's behalf. It is the spirit of the age, isn't it? Relationships are kept suspended in the artificial atmosphere of the superficial. They can be abandoned as easily as they were commenced, with both participants always able to emerge relatively unscathed and ready for the next encounter.

But there is a cost to such casualness. A whole host of things die, and no amount of sentimental pining after them will revive them. True romance, in all of its beauty, is among the victims, because it depends upon deep and lasting commitments. So is art, music, and literature, which are all founded upon the profundities of human interaction. They reflect without fail the culture which they represent, whether for good or for bad. The end point of all of this is the death of a nation's heart. It is foolish to imagine that the choices we make do not generate consequences. To be schooled in the reflexive art of not caring for others but only for ourselves produces a generation of people who, well..., are human in appearance only.

Take note of the fact that there has perhaps never been a greater rush than today's to hide such a condition under a ridiculously thin patina of care, love, and affection. Public rhetoric is filled with emotional appeals on behalf of victim groups whose complaints cannot be assuaged by any amount of apology or atoning sacrifice. It's as if the utter emptiness of modern hearts is being desperately disguised by huge, angry signs proclaiming our enormous compassion. Never will an indignant cry of self-defense be louder than when the objection is raised that the high ideals and lofty pronouncements are in fact just the opposite of what they appear to be.

But we need to pull ourselves away from these airs, place our feet solidly on the ground, and return to today's Collect: "Give us grace that we may always... endeavor ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his holy life...". St. Peter welcomes us into the consideration of the very highest service we will ever pay..., suffering rightly. As we consider our principal avatar in this matter, our Lord, we must remind ourselves that He possessed the right to refuse this role. It was love alone that compelled Him to enter this world to *humble himself, and become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross* (P'p. 2:8). At a point of time He committed Himself, and followed through with the commitment to the end. He insisted upon no pre-incarnational contractual arrangement with His Father, no way out should the bounds of convenience be exceeded.

This is also our calling in our relationship both to God and to men. If suffering is endured in the process, it is *acceptable with God*, that is, an experience upon which He confers a very special blessing. Because it is voluntarily assumed by the sufferer, it becomes the most personal of gifts that can be given. But whether it reaches this exalted state depends largely upon one's attitude toward it: *...when he was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously...* These last few words are all important. Christ suspended His own judgment of His immediate sufferings, which were greater than those known by any man. Through trust in His Father He was able to endure that which was humanly unendurable. It would be absurd to assume that the Son of God had not weighed the consequence and cost of His mission prior to assuming it. But His love for the lost clearly overruled all else.

We cannot escape these things, unless we want to escape them. The deeper our lives are entwined with those of others, the more will we be called to suffer on their behalf. When we quell a word of angry resentment during an argument, when we refuse to give way to our emotions, are we not following Christ? When we endure years of stubborn ignorance by attempting to meet it with Christian grace and prayer on behalf of those who vex us, are we not in some measure bearing their sins to God? When we accept the yoke of illness and affliction, convinced that it will all work to our good because God has promised it so, are we not following in "the blessed steps of His holy life"?

Hereunto were ye called says St. Peter. A calling? Today we think of this word in terms of a vocation or profession. And who wouldn't rather be gifted with a calling to which were attached all of the perks of fame and fortune? But the calling to which the apostle assigns us is a very lowly one, indeed. And if Christ is to be the example, it is a calling shorn of pleasantness and opportunity, but one fraught with difficulty and loss. The true test as to whether we really have accepted it will be how we behave under the most trying circumstances, those when the temptation to assert our rights and privileges is at a fever pitch, those when we can easily reserve

within our power the means of putting a halt to the situation, exiting it in some manner that delivers us from its immediate discomfort. But a precious opportunity to glorify God will be lost. As our Epistle teaches us:

...Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously... (1 Pe. 2:21-23)

Think about it! It was Simon Peter Himself who had attempted personally to take vengeance on the Lord's behalf during the arrest in Gethsemane:

And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be? (Matt. 26:51-54, & John 18:10,11)

I suspect there are many such situations. We can end arguments with force of persuasion or with raising our voices a bit more. We can punch out our timecard at work, bolt out the door, and vow never to return. We can run to the lawyer's office, and put the wheels of relief instantly into motion. But we will never have caught God's eye. And in so doing we will forfeit the chance to tell men a different tale than the one they have been used to hearing.

Although I have chosen to consider this passage as it relates primarily to personal interactions, it must be noted that this Epistle follows an important section in 1 Peter 2 that focuses on the believer's relationship to both government and employers. The same principle applies to every point of our interaction with others, whether private or public. It is a calling to learn to suffer rightly, and it requires a lifetime of practice.

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. Thankworthy! What a lovely word! Too bad it's not in use any more. This King James-ism is employed only this once in the New Testament. It could be translated "delightful to God", or "favorable" to Him. *For conscience toward God...* Such a man is ultimately concerned with the reputation and character of God, far, far above his own. He doesn't want God's image to be besmirched in the very least manner by his misbehavior. He would rather be deprived of every right that the earth could possibly bestow upon him, if it meant maintaining the integrity of God's honor.

For even hereunto were ye called...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.