

Commitment

In our rather difficult Gospel passage today, Jesus lays out two fundamental principles of Christianity: First, we are not spared from suffering, and, second, when we suffer God suffers along with us. Life is a struggle, even if we are not flogged before governors or hated by everyone! We contract diseases, grieve the death of loved ones, lose jobs, and undergo a myriad of nasty experiences—some trivial, and some catastrophic. Stuff happens! And if we would only accept that it does, and be content in the midst of it, we might find that in the very midst of it, the Holy Spirit could show us the way forward?

Nowadays, we in the church sometimes take ourselves too seriously. We imagine and presume that we can somehow take over God's salvation project. Isn't strange how God-fearing people of every political stripe and theological persuasion—faithful, caring, loving people—presume to know the mind of God, in painful detail and with absolute certainty.

Look, quite simply, we are called to be *in the midst* of the struggles of this world, and God will be in the midst of it all with us! The same God who was with the infant Isaac, who grew into a great patriarch for God's chosen people. The God who keeps watch over our lives, as the Psalmist tells us. The God who will reunite us all in a resurrection like his, as we read in the letter to the Romans. And the God-made-human who came to earth to proclaim that love is stronger than death.

Jesus tells us NOT to become players in the world's most popular game, where people become either victim or victimizer, the one who rejects or the one rejected. Or to put it differently, the world lives in fear. They fear their enemies. If they appear to have none, they manufacture some. The game must go on.

We must not have enemies. If others see us as theirs, that's their problem, but we are not to treat them as enemies, as opponents, as effective threats. We are not to be scandalized by them. We are not to play that game.

Thus we do not permit others to define who we are. We refuse to travel this way of fear. Instead, we accept the identity that comes to us from God. We

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are his children; we are of infinite value; we are free from the scandal system.

To some, this life, with its demands for forgiveness, sounds impossible. Others imagine it as unbearably weak. But, forgiveness means we refuse to be imprisoned in the scandals of this world. We refuse to be remade by the evil done to us. We are God's children, manifesting the divine image and likeness, we are free not to be scandalized. We are able to forgive others, that they too may be free. None of this is easy. But it's the only way out of the darkness.

In a conversation with us, his disciples, Jesus encourages us to stand up for kingdom living even if it means being in conflict with the mainstream of society. You will be maligned, says Jesus, for witnessing to this mission and ministry of mine.

Today's lessons are not comforting. They run counter to the belief commonly held by many Christians that if you choose to live your life in accordance with God's word, then everything will be alright. You will live in peace and quiet and that nothing bad will happen to you because you are being good.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote (Cost of Discipleship)

“THERE IS NO WAY TO PEACE ALONG THE WAY OF SAFETY. FOR PEACE MUST BE DARED, IT IS ITSELF THE GREAT VENTURE AND CAN NEVER BE SAFE. PEACE IS THE OPPOSITE OF SECURITY. TO DEMAND GUARANTEES IS TO WANT TO PROTECT ONESELF. PEACE MEANS GIVING ONESELF COMPLETELY TO GOD'S COMMANDMENT, WANTING NO SECURITY, BUT IN FAITH AND OBEDIENCE LAYING THE DESTINY OF THE NATIONS IN THE HAND OF ALMIGHTY GOD, NOT TRYING TO DIRECT IT FOR SELFISH PURPOSES. BATTLES ARE WON, NOT WITH WEAPONS, BUT WITH GOD. THEY ARE WON WHEN THE WAY LEADS TO THE CROSS.”

Look at Jeremiah, the unlikely prophet who despite strong reservations, spoke for the Lord during the last years of the Kingdom of Israel before it was conquered by the Babylonians and Jeremiah himself fled into exile in Egypt.

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He paid a high price for his faithfulness. He was accused of treason and of blasphemy. He was imprisoned. He was the object of an assassination attempt. He was ostracized by the nation, by his fellow priests and by his family. He was ridiculed and scorned. And at times he fell prey to the dark forces of despair and hopelessness, but ultimately, he trusted in the faithfulness of God.

Following the Lord has always involved a high cost. Can it be any different for us today? Following the Lord involves a cost because following the Lord cannot be done in secret. Following the Lord involves public action, it involves all aspects of our lives. Above all it involves telling others about the Lord who loves us and who gives us life. And this is where the cost begins to make itself known.

Yesterday was the feast day of the Birth of John the Baptist, and he is worth mention today because his ministry resembled that of the prophets in that he disturbed the comfortable and comforted the disturbed. Yet we see John's humility and his courage in always placing God first. When he condemned the marriage of Herod to Herod's brother's wife, he reminded us that not everything that is allowed by law is morally right. Herod had John arrested and put in prison and the beheaded for daring to speak out.

Fifteen centuries later, St. Thomas More spoke out against the marriage arrangements of Henry 8th who promptly had him beheaded! He too was aware that just because something is lawful does not mean it is morally right. His final words were, "The King's good servant, but God's first." Both these men challenge us in a time when it is not popular to speak the truth or live by the truth. Jesus reminds us to do the same also in our lives. In each of us, we ourselves are to decrease and Jesus is to increase. And commit ourselves to the Kingdom of God.

Our society faces an epidemic of lack of commitment. Those who run organisations, whether it is the Brownies or cricket teams, all complain that they find it hard to find people who will take on roles of responsibility, become Treasurers, Secretaries etc. Certainly, people want to come and take part, they don't mind being the consumers of the Brownies or the Cricket Team, but they will not commit to regular attendance or take on responsibility. Joining things has become too much

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of a commitment. Trade Unions, political parties, Working Men's Clubs all struggle to maintain their membership. Of course, there are all kinds of sociological reasons to explain this, but generally, if you want to persuade people to do things you have to downplay the commitment involved. But Jesus doesn't say, "Come and follow me, in your own time, no pressure"?

No! He told that bunch of scared men that their new way of life was going to be tough. THEY rose to the challenge, rose magnificently to the challenge. They were heroes and heroines, those early Christians: brave, self-sacrificing, and unswerving in their commitment to Jesus and to the church. It is difficult to imagine people behaving with the courage and commitment of those first Christians.

Isn't it true that we become the people we are expected to be. If you tell a child to be afraid of walking through a stream then she is, if you tell someone they can't or need not do something, then they won't do it. If you continually warn people not to overextend themselves, to be careful because they are frail, then they become frail and fearful. We must train ourselves to be brave Christians, giving generously of ourselves. We need to be willing to willing to take a risk with ourselves. Jesus told his disciples that they need not be afraid, that they would be guided and protected, that they were precious in the eyes of God. He reassured them that, although their feelings and their bodies might be hurt, no harm could come to their souls.

A journalist was assigned to the Jerusalem bureau of his newspaper. He gets an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. After several weeks, he realizes that whenever he looks at the wall he sees an old Jewish man praying vigorously. The journalist wondered whether there was a publishable story here. He goes down to the wall, introduces himself and says: "You come every day to the wall. What are you praying for?" The old man replies: "What am I praying for? In the morning, I pray for world peace, then I pray for the brotherhood of man. I go home, have a glass of tea, and I come back to the wall to pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth."

The journalist is taken by the old man's sincerity and persistence. "You mean you have been coming to the wall to pray every day for these things?" The old man nods. "How long have you been coming to the wall to pray for these things?" The old man becomes reflective and then replies: "How long? Maybe twenty, twenty-five years." The amazed journalist finally asks: "How does it feel to come and pray every day for over 20 years for these things?"

"How does it feel?" the old man replies. "It feels like I'm talking to a wall."

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Oh, for the gift of patience and commitment!

Teresa of Avila, was world famous as a theologian, reformer of the Carmelite Order, and spiritual advisor to the great medieval Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross. But Teresa's ministry was not well received in the community that she loved. Her sisters had grown lax in faith and practice, she called for reform, and their response was to throw her out of convents that she herself had established. On one occasion, she was turned out at night in the middle of a rainstorm. Dressed from head to toe in her coarse wool habit, she got back into her donkey cart and was riding along when the wheel of the cart hit a ditch and the cart turned over, dumping Teresa into the mud. She sat there, in mud-soaked wool, looked up to heaven, and said, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder that you don't have many."

But frustrated as she was, Teresa clung to God. Her writings also lead us to suspect that she got a response from God while sitting in that muddy ditch! And the fruit of her patient faithfulness is still evident today.

She wrote:

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing make you afraid,
All things are passing,
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Nothing is lacking to the one who has God--
God alone is enough.

It is true, that “Only he will be blessed who remains loyal to Jesus and his word until the end.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer