

Fifth Sunday of the Year February 04, 2018

Job 7:1-4, 6-7; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1: 29-39.

Suffering is inevitable in life. Each religion has to deal with this as a fact. The maximal intensity of suffering is death. In the face of suffering man is powerless and he tries to find meaning to it. In Christianity, the attitude towards suffering is quite basic and definitive. It is the suffering of Christ that gives meaning to our sufferings. Christ has come as the redeemer and the conqueror of suffering and of death. He does not limit his healing mission to the physical sufferings alone but seeks to heal the whole person. The inner healing of the person and the forgiveness of sins is the mission of Jesus. God intervenes in human situation to alleviate suffering, yet he permits suffering to take place. Sufferings often motivate people to seek God, and as they draw closer to Him they can understand Him better. In the first reading we have Job, that legendary model of long-suffering patience, is speaking of the tiresomeness of life. He complains of the hardships he had to experience in life in the face of sudden disasters. He gives expression to the pain and sorrow he is facing. He is unable to see the happiness that lies in store for him. In the second reading Paul speaks of the obligation imposed on him to preach the Word of God, making himself the slave of the Gospel. Yet he does this task willingly and freely without looking for any reward. The Gospel gives the vivid picture of healing ministry of Jesus and his popularity as everyone was searching for him. But he chooses to go to other places to continue his ministry of preaching and healing. In the midst of his heavy work of teaching and healing he spends his time in prayer.

In the first reading Job feeling abandoned by friends and by God when confronted with sufferings, offers the dark reflection on the world. The story of Job expresses a typical human problem that bad things happen to good people and the question whether people can serve God selflessly, without hope of any reward. In all his suffering, Job did not know what we know, that he was being tested by God to see if he would remain faithful in his service to God. He did not know Satan was challenging God regarding his loyalty. He did not know that in the end, God would reward his faithful loyalty, blessing him with more than he had in the beginning. Job and his friends did have an extended dialogue on sufferings. One said that Job had sinned. Another said that Job should repent. The last said that Job's guilt deserved punishment. Even his wife questioned his integrity, telling him to curse God so he could die. But, remaining faithful in the service of the Lord, Job said that he has received good things from the hand of God and why not receive bad

things from him. At this point of his journey there appears to be no end to Job's misery. The nights seem to drag on and on since he is unable to sleep because of all his pain. For him his days seem to move more swiftly than a shuttle across the threads on a loom. Soon the frail fabric that is his life will come to an end.

In the Second Reading Paul expresses his fidelity in the service of the Lord. To emphasize this fact he tells them how he has given up rights and privileges which he certainly could claim, in order to give himself fully and entirely to the spreading of the gospel among them and to be free from any personal interest and gains. Thinking spiritually, he considers himself as a slave indebted to Jesus, never being able to repay for the gift of salvation that was promised to him by the grace of God. The fact that he had been chosen by Jesus to proclaim the Gospel was not a reason to boast. It was an obligation as a born again Christian to preach the Word of God in answer to his calling to walk his living faith in Christ. His loyalty to Christ who had personally called him motivated him to preach the Gospel so that he could share in the eternal reward that awaits all those who remain as faithful servants of the Lord. Paul viewed his work for the Lord as he being entrusted with a commission, to be the faithful ambassador of Jesus. Therefore his first and utmost preoccupation is to deliver the message at all cost in complete obedience and service to his master. He does his work freely and willingly, without any charge. He says that in order to win many over to Christ, he made himself a slave to all. He set aside many of the freedoms that he previously enjoyed in order to make himself acceptable to all. He becomes all things to all in order to save at least some.

When Mark in his Gospel describes the typical day in the life of Jesus, he explains the first of his missionary activity in Galilee. Jesus taught as one with authority, preached convincingly the Word of God in the Synagogue of Capernaum and by a single command drove the unclean spirit out of a man. Later the same day after sundown, he worked many more miracles of healing, beginning with Peter's mother-in-law and drove out many other demons. They brought many persons who were sick and he healed their illness. Early next morning he left Peter's house and went to a lonely place to pray. Here Peter and his companions found him in prayer and told him that all people were waiting to see him in Capernaum. But Jesus told them that his plan was not to restrict himself to one place but to travel to other towns and villages of Galilee to bring them the good news of the Messianic Kingdom. Surely on this first day of his public ministry among the people of Capernaum, people realized that this man from Nazareth who had

come to proclaim God's word among them was no ordinary preacher, no ordinary rabbi, and no ordinary man. They saw his extra ordinary way of proclaiming the Word and were astonished and amazed at his power and authority. His teaching and life was totally different from their own teachers.

In the gospel of today Jesus shows himself as a divine friend, who is at work curing the sick people. He is using his human and spiritual energies to bring healing and wholeness into their lives. His was a totally different approach: he was there to serve, to give, to share. He was not a person who looked for power, influence, success, wealth. He truly was a Man for Others, quiet and generous. That attitude of his was life-giving, that gave his work meaning and value. Although the disciples Simon, Andrew, James and John had not known Jesus long, they had already begun telling him their troubles. The first thing they tell him about the sickness in Peter's own house. Mark tells us that Jesus moved from the synagogue where he performed the exorcism, to the house of Simon Peter and Andrew where he does the healing of Simon's mother-in-law who was suffering from fever. The event is described with a minimum of words. When Jesus is informed about it, he goes into the house, takes the woman by her hand and raises her up and the fever is gone. The word translated as "helped her up", is the same word often used for the resurrection of Jesus. There is something more than a simple cure from fever in this person's case. The woman's immediate response to being raised up is that she waited on them or served them their meals. Mark uses the same words after the Temptation Narrative where after the Satan left, the angels waited on him. This implies a form of service or ministry. The woman has been set free of her illness to minister to and with Jesus.

Mark follows the healing of Simon's mother-in-law with what is called a summary statement. These statements are inserted into the Gospel at strategic places where Mark wants to make a transition in thought or action. Generally these statements have Jesus healing many people of all kinds of diseases, casting out demons and attracting large crowds of people. He undertook this action not to enhance his attractiveness to people but he did the healing because he was interested in people who needed help. People who heard about his healing approached him with their ailments. Observing fully the law of Sabbath, they came to him after sunset, when the Sabbath was over bringing those sick and those possessed by demons and Jesus healed them all. Through his healing miracles Jesus seeks to give dignity to the human person for in general sickness is considered weakness. However this includes a sad note too. People did not come

to him out of love but just to be healed. Here is an added reference to Jesus not allowing the demons to speak because they knew him. This is referred to as the messianic secret. Jesus does not want his real identity known until after his death and resurrection. Otherwise he might be misunderstood as another healer and a powerful miracle worker and miss the real purpose of his mission.

At the same time Mark shows us that his mission was incomplete without his personal contact with his Father. Early Sunday morning Jesus went off to a deserted place to pray. He goes there, not to escape from the pressures of life, but to be refreshed for further service. The Evangelists tell us about the prayer of Jesus at important moment of his life or at times of stress over the true nature of his ministry. All this time Jesus sought communion with God through his prayer. He goes alone to a quiet place withdrawing completely from activities and looking for quiet time with God. Indeed this was the moment of success for him when all admired his power. His disciples came to inform him that all were looking for him indicating his popularity and the desire of people to retain him there with them so that he could minister to their needs. Jesus must have shocked them when he expressed his desire to move elsewhere to other towns and villages. For him it was a moment of stress and decision. They had only seen him as a miracle worker and now he shows the real purpose of his coming. This is just the beginning of a misunderstanding between Jesus and his followers over the true nature of his mission and the meaning of the discipleship. His mission to establish the kingdom of God was not understood by them. His communion with his Father would have allowed him to search out the meaning of his mission. Once he found it in his prayer he tells his disciples that they have to go elsewhere and he will have to preach there too. It would have been a difficult decision when he experienced the popularity. Yet the love of God and obedience to him was more important.

The Gospel seems to hint that the disciples are basking in the reflected glory of Jesus' popularity and disappointed that Jesus went off just when things seemed to be going so well. But Jesus showed no interest in being the center of attraction, of being popular, of being 'successful'. He simply wanted to be in places where the real needs of people existed. He had given what he could give in one place and he will now move on to other places to serve others in the same way. In his response to the disciples Jesus did not directly condemn their worldly outlook but indicated that his mission indeed has a new purpose, an entirely different objective. He had not come to earth to bring earthly prosperity to any town or country but to bring spiritual salvation and blessing on all people. That very morning having spent his

time with his Father he began to carry out his mission and for the remaining two years or more he went from town to town proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Therefore Mark concludes by saying that Jesus went to their synagogues in every village and this would have taken long time to accomplish. His going from one synagogue to another acted not merely as a social worker with a great heart, or as a reformer fighting for a particular cause. He saw the mystery of human suffering much more profoundly. Suffering deep in human existence, and an essential part of human nature, needs a healing. Jesus realized the need of people and worked to bring that healing and ultimately to the full reconciliation with the divine. He did not ignore pain but went out of his way to remove it and show the working of God with human persons.

Today's Readings tell us that we have different examples of how one can think spiritually as against worldly thinking. They echo how the weak human nature often overcomes the spiritual nature that perceives the greater mysteries of God. We have come to the realization that in order to remain faithful in the service of the Lord, we must embrace a spiritual mind so that we can understand the things of God. We have learned that no matter how hard life be at times, by the power of the Holy Spirit and a spiritual approach we can overcome any obstacles in life. We can by the grace of God the Father in the Name of Jesus face any suffering and pain. As we receive freely from God many blessings, we must give freely to others our self, not expecting any worldly reward. What Jesus presents us today is a life filled with meaning: A life where there is time for prayer, reflection and coming closer to God; where there is time for sharing with others in word and action; where there is time for building and healing and reconciling. Jesus needed prayer to find the will of his Father and he shows us way to pray in order to discover the will of God in our lives and discover the path he has chosen for us. Prayer is essential for everyone and helps us to overcome the darkness of life. There is absolutely no one who cannot learn to live like this. During this week let us reflect on the typical day in the life of Jesus: a teacher, a preacher, a healer and a man of prayer. As the followers of Jesus let us all aim to be like him in our life and in our proclamation of his kingdom.

This real story is said of the German concentration camp during the Second World War. In the camp were a group of rabbis and learned Jews along with persons who had been in high standing prior to their arrest. They had to work for six and half days every week but on Sunday afternoons they were left in relative peace. One such afternoon some of the learned Jews in their despair decided to put God

on trial. The rabbis acted as judges and witnesses came forward for defense and for the prosecution. The case for the prosecution was overwhelming. They had only to look around them: they were being wiped out as a race; many of their families had already died in the gas chambers. They were unable to look for their dear ones. How could a good God allow this to happen? The judges, despite a stout defense had no difficulty in reaching the verdict. God was guilty as charged, guilty of abandoning his chosen people. Silence fell upon the court. Then an elderly Jew got to his feet and said: "Nevertheless, let us not forget...it is time for our Evening Prayers."

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India