

5th Sunday Lent (B)

- I was reflecting about the prayer at the beginning of today's Mass: *'Father in heaven, the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross that his brothers & sisters might glory in new life. Change our selfishness into self-giving. Help us to embrace the world you have given us that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life & joy of Easter.'*
- Our period of preparation for Easter is fast drawing to a close.
- We are soon to enter Holy Week in which we contemplate Jesus, his arms outstretched on the cross, embracing our world.
- There is much darkness & pain in our world.
- The Church invites us to be disciples of Jesus & embrace the world with him, because it is only the love of God which we see revealed in Jesus that has the power to transform our suffering.
- Jesus shares it with us & takes us through it to the joy & new life of his resurrection.
- There is a lot of suffering in our lives & too much of it in the world around us – physical suffering, suffering of the heart & suffering of the mind.
- When suffering comes upon us it is often accompanied by confusion & at these times none of us find it easy to cope.
- If we fail to find any meaning at all in it we can be tempted to despair.
- So the question I wish to ask is: Does our knowing that Jesus suffered help give some meaning to our own suffering that can enable us to bear it, & perhaps be of some help to others in their pain & confusion?
- Jesus certainly suffered – we know of his torture & ultimate death.
- We can also imagine how much he suffered in his heart.
- People failed to believe him when he revealed to them a God of love.
- He was rejected, he was also betrayed, denied & abandoned even by those in the inner circle of his chosen friends.
- We have some insight into his mental anguish when we reflect on his prayer in the agony in the garden & on the cross.
- Firstly, let us examine some of the common misunderstandings that people have when they think of suffering & its relation to God's will.
- Some think that God is using suffering to punish us for something which we have done wrong.
- It is obviously true that we do bring a lot of suffering upon ourselves by our wrong-headed behaviour, but the fact that Jesus was innocent should alert us to the fact that there is no necessary connection between suffering & guilt.
- Furthermore we should see the crucifixion of Jesus for what it was: a sinful decision made by people acting against what God wanted for us.
- They were not carrying out God's will. They were resisting it.
- The crucifixion was not God punishing Jesus, but people acting badly.

- Some tend to jump to the conclusion that it is somehow God's will that we should be suffering in the way we are.
- It is true that God created a world that is in process: earthquakes, monsoons, bushfires, pandemics & natural disasters are inevitably part of this process & if people are caught up in them, they certainly suffer.
- But we shouldn't be thinking of God as willing any particular disaster.
- It's true that God created people free to be able to say "No" to love, & when we do, we & others suffer, but we shouldn't think of God as willing the kinds of destructive behaviour that bring so much suffering on people & on our world.
- On the contrary, when we or others are suffering because of the destructive behaviour perpetrated by those who obstinately reject God & his love & act sinfully, we shouldn't think of the consequent suffering as being in any way God's will.
- As we watch Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, we are right to imagine God weeping over the world & feeling the pain that his wonderful creation is experiencing.
- I'm not saying that God is a victim of our cruelty, or that God stands by helpless. No, God is present with his grace inspiring everyone to stop doing evil & to do good.
- Just imagine how beautiful this world would be if everyone took seriously the words & deeds of Jesus.
- Even when we behave in destructive ways, God is present to us & to the victims of our sin, pouring out his grace upon us so that we will find healing & reconciliation, & new ways of relating.
- But then we can also consider some of the fruits of suffering which grow only in the garden of suffering.
- In the Second Reading we are told that Jesus himself learned to obey through suffering. It can be the same for us.
- Jesus would have always been in touch with his heart, but we can't always say the same of ourselves.
- When we are strong, when we are successful, when we are managing well, we can be distracted & we can forget how totally dependent we are on God, the source of our life.
- Suffering can force us to face & accept our frailty & dependence.
- It can cast us back into the arms of God.
- When, through a miracle of grace, we find ourselves coping with pain & disappointment, we can come to a deeper faith.
- Suffering can force us to listen to our hearts which otherwise can get caught-up under a whole lot of distraction & busyness.
- When we suffer, our heart is in pain, but at least we are in touch with it, & in listening to our hearts we may hear God speaking to us.

- Do you find that when you are suffering you are the most real, the most in touch, & can be the most attuned to others who suffer?
- Besides deepening our faith, suffering can lead us to hope.
- Recognising our own weakness, we look to God for strength & we experience a courage that we can recognise as pure gift.
- It is not something we drum up from our own resources.
- It is the strength of Christ upholding us.
- Suffering can break our heart, but we can find that in the breaking, our heart is forced open.
- We become more sensitive to the pain of others as we experience something of the compassion of the Heart of Jesus.
- Just as a seedpod has to break open so that the seeds can germinate in the soil, so when our hearts are broken we experience a depth of love for others that we never knew we had.
- When we grow in love through suffering, we can be God's instruments in drawing other people to God's love.
- I do not want to pretend that we can understand suffering - it remains a mystery & beyond our comprehension, but we can learn from Jesus to place our trust in God who can bring fruit out of suffering.
- He does not want us to suffer, but he always draws close to us when we are in pain.
- God is not as the one willing the suffering, but the one loving us in it.
- As we watch & admire Jesus on the cross, let us unite our suffering to his & allow him to come to us & bear our pain with us.
- Is it enough for you that Jesus was a "good man" who had a lot of valuable things to say & values to leave us?
- Or, must he have some other role in your life, a role that would help you believe there is more to this life than we can see?
- That can only happen if we let him in.