

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter

“It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” we hear today in the Book of Acts. These sobering words were pronounced on the lips of St. Paul, a man, you may know, who endured so much suffering in his life. In his second letter to the Corinthians, for example, St. Paul gives us a list of just what he endured in his all-consuming efforts to share the Gospel message – to share the Good News that the Son of God truly died for each and every human being, so that our sins would be forgiven; who, by rising triumphantly from the grave, has enabled us to share eternal life with God in heaven. Here’s what Paul himself says in 2nd Corinthians he endured: imprisonments, beatings, brushes with death; forty lashes minus one, being beaten with rods; he was shipwrecked three times, suffered danger from robbers; he knew hunger and thirst, cold and exposure, and on top of all that, the daily pressure upon him of anxiety for all the church communities he founded. And why did he endure all this? For the sake of the Gospel – so that just as he had been so powerfully converted from being a hater of Jesus and a persecutor of the Christians to a lover of Christ and the greatest servant of the Church, so could others too know the saving power of God in the cross and Resurrection of His Son. In other words, he endured all that suffering then so that we could inherit the great faith we as Christians are blessed to possess today.

Many people suffer in life for a greater good, though, not just St. Paul. For example, I think of our parents, who work hard and offer up themselves day in and day out so that we, their children, could have a better life. I think of our forefathers and ancestors here in America, who worked so hard and gave of their lives, so that we could be born into the free nation that we have today. I think of those of you who are students, and for all that you sacrifice each day by your hard work in your classes and academic lives so that you can have a better life in the future.

Yes, sacrifice and suffering is a necessary thing for us to endure for greater good to come forth. After all, the saying goes, “No pain, no gain”. And we need not be afraid of sacrifice and suffering in our lives – although we often are. Yes, it’s something that we all try to avoid, or at least minimize. No one likes the pain and anguish of being sick, especially a lengthy illness; or, the anguish caused by the death of a loved one, the pain of a break-up, the agitation of constant temptation, or the interior suffering that one might bear silently each day. But the Good News of Christ – as shared in the Gospel message we hear today – is that in Him suffering does not have to be done in vain. His agony and death on the cross was the greatest form of suffering someone could ever expect to endure. And yet, God righted that wrong and vindicated His Son’s anguish as He resurrected Him from the dead.

So too does God want to do in our lives as disciples of His Son! When we come to Christ with our pain and in our suffering, and willingly give it to Him in prayer, He takes from us what we cannot bear on our own, and He gives to us the strength to carry crosses that would seem otherwise just too heavy to bear. This is the grace that comes to us when we don't try to run away from our suffering, or try to bury it, or push it down, or sweep it under the carpet hoping it will all just go away. We must make an act of the will to take that which scares us, or causes us comfort, distress, or anguish, and offer it up to the Father through His Son, who suffered and died for us.

And this really works! When I was so sick a couple weeks back – and realized there was nothing I could do to alleviate my sickness – I had the choice to worry, to ignore, or to pray. And by offering up to God what I was going through, I found the peace and strength I needed. But even more, I found myself intimately closer to God in my personal relationship with Him. He is “God-with-us” after all! And He will us anything to draw us closer to Him – and in a special way, suffering.

And so, amid the suffering that we each may be going through, may the power of Christ fill us with hope to endure. For as St. Paul teaches in another letter – to the Romans – suffering “produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” May our suffering be turned into God's blessing in our lives. God bless you.