

Homily for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord”.

We just heard those words in our first reading today from the prophet Isaiah. And they are so true. If it were up to me – on my recent pilgrimage to Italy, pasta would have only had half the calories, and gelato (this creamy, delicious Italian ice cream) would have no fat! But God’s ways are different, aren’t they? And too much of a good thing isn’t a good thing – at least where food is concerned!

Also, if it were up to me, there wouldn’t be any suffering in the world. I mean, how many hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods have there been recently! And for that matter, if it were up to me, let’s get rid of all the personal suffering in our lives too – illness, heartache, sadness, and despair. But God, He allows all of this. Why? His ways are not our ways.

Now, when it comes to suffering, I would dare say that our society is really obsessed with avoiding it. We take a Tylenol at the first sign of a headache. We’re disgruntled when we have to give up meat on Fridays in Lent. We complain about the thickness or firmness of our pillows! And yet, God’s ways are not our ways.

What does God think about suffering? Does he try to distance Himself from it at all cost? Does He numb Himself from it by entertaining Himself to death? Does He dread or complain about it? No, He goes right into the middle of it. As St. Bonaventure has said, “There is no other path than through the burning love of the Crucified”. In other words, if our Savior chose not to avoid suffering, but rather to embrace it on the cross for our sake, there will be no avoiding suffering for us either. God’s ways are not our ways.

Now, this past week, on Friday, even before I read these Scripture readings for today, I was wrestling with God in prayer about this very topic. In my prayer journal I wrote the following: “It is necessary for God to humble us from our lofty pride of self-sufficiency. In other words, I have this desire to eradicate all the sufferings and crosses in my life so that I can achieve a sort of man-made, pseudo utopia – a plateau of artificially achieved “peace” – a type of reprieve from any and all stress and discord and discomfort. The pathway to peace, though, is not avoiding and eradicating all my crosses, but to accept them as a means of God cultivating humility within me. I do not get to choose His means of doing this. I just get to choose whether I’m going to cooperate with Him or not.”

Someone who understood this whole “redemptive suffering” thing so well was Saint Padre Pio. Many of you have heard about him before. And I know of several of you, including members from our youth ministry, Fusion, who have taken a trip up to his national shrine nearby in Berks County. Well, on my pilgrimage to Italy, one of our stops was San Giovanni Rotondo, the place where this Capuchin friar lived his simple yet extraordinary life. Actually, if I’m honest, Padre Pio was the main reason I wanted to go on this trip in the first place. To give you a couple words about his life, Padre Pio suffered the stigmata – the very physical marks of Jesus’ crucifixion – on his own body for 50 years. And the interior sufferings that he endured from so many different sources were even worse.

Now, how is it that this relatively obscure priest from the middle-of-nowhere Italy has become one of the greatest saints of our modern times? He only died in 1968. And actually (today) September 23rd is his feast day! How? In part because of how he was able to reach people with a profound message of faith and hope in regards to the suffering that they, and every human being, experiences. Here are some of Padre Pio's words in a letter he wrote: "Father, how sweet is the word 'cross'! Here at the foot of Jesus' Cross, souls are clothed in light and inflamed with love; here they acquire wings to bear them upwards in loftiest flight. May the Sorrowful Virgin obtain for us from her most holy son the grace to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of the Cross, and like her, to become inebriated with Jesus' sufferings. The surest sign of love is the capacity to suffer for the beloved, and since the Son of God endured many sufferings for pure love, there is no doubt that the cross carried for Him becomes as loveable as love itself."

My friends, this is the Good News of the Gospel – that the suffering that each of us endures – in whatever way we have, are, or will endure it – is not in vain. While suffering is in the world because of the mystery of sin, God uses our individual crosses and sufferings to redeem us, and to increase within us and prove our love for Him. Just look at the example of Jesus, and we see the powerful truth.

At the end of the day, I'm not saying that we should go out looking for suffering. No, our crosses will find us. But what sets us apart as Christians is that when suffering comes, we have a place to go with it – to the cross of Christ. There, we can take Jesus our burdens, and personally experience the peace and the strength that His love has won for us. And in this way, we will come to love Him more and more. God bless you.