

Sunday 5B SFX 2023

Did you know that today in Capernaum you can see a trace of the remains of the house where Simon Peter and Andrew lived, and where Jesus healed Peter mother-in-law. It has been a focus of devotion for Christians since early times. What I like about today's healing story is that Jesus goes into the home, into the family to bring healing and hope. It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus was surrounded by so much suffering. He seemed happiest in his ministry of bringing comfort to those around him.

Suffering is personal, as Job knows. How many people quietly live with struggles and heartaches, and bear with their pain and suffering with as much grace as possible.

The Book of Job is about suffering. Yet it begins almost like a fairy tale, of a good man from the Land of Uz whose life was filled with many blessings, whose life turns to misery. It raises many complex theological issues, but at its heart is the question: **Why do innocent people suffer?** Expressed in the title of a famous book by the Rabbi Harold Kushner: *"When Bad Things Happen to Good People."* It is a question philosophers call Theodicy.

Well I have to be honest with you. I don't have an answer to that question. G.K. Chesterton wrote that *"The Iliad is great because all life is a battle; the Odyssey is great because all life is a journey; the Book of Job is great because all life is a riddle."* I am afraid it is a **riddle**, and suffering is at the heart of it.

If someone comes to me and asks me about the problem of suffering, I think my only answer is that **we believe in a God who came and experienced our suffering**. Jesus wept. He knew affliction. He taught us that somehow it can be transformative, redemptive. He didn't come to whisk away from a world of suffering. The Risen Christ still bears his wounds.

Explanations about suffering don't work when I am called to the bedside of a dying parishioner, when comforting a grief-stricken family, when in a nursing home I meet people's pain and suffering, when in the confessional people share their mental, spiritual afflictions and human struggles. Those of you who work in the hospitals or nursing homes see it on a daily basis.

There are no easy answers to suffering. But Jesus points to a way through, that we should support one another, try to lift the burden, lighten to load, because everyone in their lives carries a burden of suffering. I am sure I am not the only one who can struggle to find to find the right words to say to someone who is grieving or suffering.

"Comfort my people, comfort them, says your God" Isaiah 40:1. **The Fourth Spiritual Work of Mercy is "Comfort the sorrowful"** which brings me back to the Book of Job. Job has been described as *"the most long-winded book in the Bible,"* and mainly because he has these so-called friends who show up when he is at his worst. You may have heard of **Job's Comforters** - that's them. They leap to solve Job's problem, they get defensive, they try to convince him that it must be his fault. They blame Job's family. They drone on and on while he was in the midst of sitting on a dung-heap.

Pity, because initially they seemed to have got it right, but perhaps just lost patience. What they did get right was sit with him in silence. *"They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13.)* We all know how difficult it is to be with people when they are really suffering, in pain or even close to death.

The work of comforting the sorrowful requires patience, sensitivity, silence.

To this day, there is the unique Jewish way of mourning inspired by those seven days of silence in the Book of Job called "sitting shiva", literally "sitting seven." Friends come to sit with mourners at home over a period of a week. Conversation, chatter, reason, argument, theology, even good words can be so much noise in the background to pain that just has to be borne. Sorrow must often be allowed to run its course. With grief there is not much to say or do, it has to be lived through.

Henri Nouwen, who suffered from depression throughout his life, wrote, "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares." Comfort comes from entering into the sorrow of others. *"Weep with those who weep"* Romans 12:15.

I think of relatives sitting at the bedside of a dying loved-one. Many have long held on to the belief that even when someone is unconscious, and all other signs of life seem to have faded away, their loved one might still be able to hear them speak. They might play them their favourite song, their favourite piece of music in their last hours of life.

A study published by a team at the University of British Columbia seems to indicate that this in fact is true. Even while unconscious and close to death, a person can hear what is being said to them. The ability to listen is one of the last things to leave us. They found that unresponsive patients still have their sense of hearing hours before they die. From experience from my mother dying a few years ago I believe that to be the case.

The precise words may not be understood, but they hear the voice, and know the love.

When that study was published it was suggested that it might also explain curious stories of unconscious people "waiting" for a spouse or family member to arrive at their bedside before dying. A lovely thought.

But let me end on a lighter note. That study prompted one of those humorous letters to The Times. "Sir, it is fascinating to know that loved ones can still hear while close to death. However, if my husband does not listen in this life, I think he is highly unlikely to as he enters the next." Ouch.