

## Jesus, the Cross and Suffering ...

20/8/17

**I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

A few years ago, as I drove to school in the early mornings, I used to notice a bedraggled man walking forlornly along the pavements of Green point clutching a plastic bag with his meagre possessions in it. For many days, at the same time every morning, our paths would cross and I would often wonder what his story was, where he came from and where he was going to...

A few months later I looked up an old mechanic friend whom I used to work with in a VW workshop when I was still a student. Allie was a brilliant air-cooled mechanic and I learnt a lot from him. Jump twenty years forward and Allie now had his own workshop in Montague Gardens. As I was having problems with the gearbox in my Polo at the time, I decided to look Allie up and ask him for help.

I arrived at the workshop and Allie asked one of his mechanics to start removing the gearbox from my Polo. After exchanging some pleasantries, I was astounded to notice the old man from Green point sitting at the reception desk carefully stroking a cat sitting on his knee. I quietly asked Allie who this gentleman was and how he came to be here working for you in reception. Allie sighed and related a very sad story to me...

“You know, Darron, this is such a sad story that I still can’t believe,” Allie started, “this gentleman used to be a top top accountant who had his own finance company. He originally did all my books and assisted me with my tax and vat returns. One day something happened. I don’t know what. He lost everything. He went from being a person at the top of his game to having nothing, to being absolutely broken. Out of the goodness of my heart I asked him to sit at my reception desk and handle some basic paperwork for me. He even slept in my workshop at one stage but the landlord found out and put a stop to that. I just can’t believe how this person’s life has changed. I think he now stays in the back packer lodge in Green point.”

I would like to take a moment this morning and unpack the notion of suffering. This is a difficult and complex topic to preach on. Many Priests avoid sermons on the problem of suffering as it is just so real and often difficult to process, never mind construct a workable theology around. Perhaps it is for this reason that I have waited many years before tackling the subject. Let me just say right at the outset, that preaching on this matter is no easy task and I do not for a moment proclaim to have all the answers. Suffering is an intensely personal subject that all of us experience at some point in our lives. It is something that ALL of us have to deal with...

Many people refuse the love of Jesus and God in their lives when they respond with issues like:

If God is a God of love, why does He allow suffering in the world?

If God is a God of love, why does He allow the innocent to suffer?

If God is a God of love, why does He allow animals to suffer?

If God is omnipresent and all powerful, surely He has the power to eradicate suffering from the world?

These are just a few of the comments I have received from various people over the years. People who find themselves disillusioned with the proposed love of God when they personally witness or experience suffering of some kind.

Sometimes, it is hard for me to don my white collar when I clearly do not have all the answers to questions like these. These are eternal questions that we will, as Christians; struggle with for the rest of our lives. It is not my plan to share complex theological dogma and apologetics around the Christian response to suffering this morning. I confess I do not understand all of them. I would much rather open a frank discussion around the problem or blessing of suffering that the person in the pew can relate to...

Wait, did I say blessing? Could suffering actually be seen as a blessing? Hold onto that point for a moment. We will come back to it, for it is an important idea.

We need to understand some points around suffering before we unpack it further:

Firstly: We need to understand that every living being on this planet will go through some sort of suffering at some point in their lives. As I have grown older I have become more aware of suffering as people, friends and family around me have started dying, or divorcing, losing wealth, losing health to name but a few forms of suffering. We ALL suffer.

Secondly, I have noted over the years that there seem to be three types of personalities when it comes to suffering a life changing event.

- There are those people who go into a shut down. They are unable to process the life changing event. It is too large for them to handle. They are unable to see beyond what has happened to them. They therefore choose to bail out of life as they knew it. They begin to operate at a very basic level of life that is closed off to the world, to others and even to God. They merely exist. A former shell of what they once were. Remember Allie's, accountant? He would be an example of this response.
- Then there are those folk who pretend that nothing has happened at all in their lives. In spite of the life changing event, they ignore it to the best of their ability and merely carry on with their lives as if nothing is different or has changed. These people are shut off to the growth that this life changing event may offer their lives. They are afraid of the challenge that suffering brings. They only deal with the bare minimum in order to get by.
- Lastly, there are the folk who take their suffering as an opportunity for growth. A time to reflect upon their journey in life, with themselves, with one another and with God, even if it means completing their life journey through dying. These folk, accept what has happened in their lives and instead of lashing out to those around them, including God, use the life changing experience to grow spiritually in awareness and depth. (It needs to be said here that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross denotes the stages of grief in her books on death and dying. Her comments are valid and this would be an interesting topic for another sermon on another day)

So let's recap for a moment:

We have learnt this morning that:

Everyone suffers

Everyone handles suffering differently

We noted in the Gospel reading this morning in Matthew how Jesus relates to a Canaanite woman whose daughter is suffering terribly from a demon. The ultimate lesson from this Gospel message is that Jesus honours those who have great faith. This is the key to suffering.

As Christians, we need to realise and accept, that God never promised a world free of suffering, for ultimately, to be fully human is to experience and live the full gamut of human emotions in all their depth and intensity. This is what being fully human is all about. To deny the existence of human suffering is essentially to deny a full human experience of life and living. Therefore, it follows that if we are to be fully human and fully aware of the human experience and all it has to offer, we need to accept that there will always be suffering along with joy in our lives. We cannot choose what human experiences we will have in our lives; we can only choose HOW we respond to these experiences in our lives.

So, while God did not promise a world free of suffering, He did promise that He would journey with us in our life if we choose to include Him. Furthermore, God went one step further by showing us how serious He is about suffering. God allowed His only begotten Son to suffer and die on the Cross. This is important to us as Christians, because by allowing His Son to suffer and die upon the Cross, God is saying to us that He understands and identifies with us during our times of trials and suffering. God does not merely stand loftily above us and peer down upon our struggles in life... no, He walks with us in faith. This is the promise of the Cross. This is what Jesus dying on the Cross meant for you and me during our times of suffering and pain. It is during these times in our lives that we need to be strong in our

faith and be open to the journey of life and what it is trying to teach our souls.

Ultimately, we are all broken people, struggling with the ups and downs of life as we strive to make sense of a troubled world that seeks constantly for meaning and affirmation. Yet, it is during these times of struggle and pain that we can turn to Jesus in such a way that He will enrich our lives in ways we can only imagine, as long as we remain open spiritually, emotionally and physically to life. This can be a tall order at times when we feel like buckling under the stress of various life experiences.

I don't have all the answers about life and suffering.

I can only confirm what I am sure of:

- I do know that Jesus loves all of us, in spite of us being broken and imperfect
- I do know that Jesus walks with us, especially during our times of suffering and pain
- I do know, that just like the woman from Canaanite kept her faith during times of pain, so too should we as Christians continue to believe in the love and promises of God, in spite of what we are experiencing in our daily lives
- I do know that the Cross remains the ultimate symbol of suffering and love that we can look up to
- I do know that as Christians we should always strive to see our suffering as a blessing that can teach us anew about the love and promises of God

I am reminded of the quote from Henri Nouwen who says it so well...

***“We live with broken bodies, broken hearts, broken minds, or broken spirits. We suffer from broken relationships. How can we live with our brokenness? Jesus invites us to embrace our brokenness as he embraced the cross and live it as part of our mission. He asks us not to reject our brokenness as a curse from God that reminds us of our sinfulness, but to accept it and put it **under God’s blessing for our purification** and sanctification. Thus, our brokenness can become a gateway to new life.”***

May God bless you this week whatever your journey may entail in this phase of your life.

Amen.