

4/17/05

EASTER IV

I Peter 2:19-25, Year A

“...one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly ... to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” In nomine ❖

Suffering is something no reasonable person seeks. But come it will. Physical pain from some injury or disease. Mental, emotional, psychological, or spiritual pain: from the effect on our minds, hearts, spirits of physical injury or disease, problems in relationships, disturbance in jobs or income, discoveries of disorder in our character or personality, the experience of God as absent.

And suffering comes as well simply from living a life of integrity, trying to live as God would have you, trying to become the saint he has made you to be. This is a fallen world, a world bent on supplanting God. Lives of integrity, lives of holiness are in-breakings of God within this rebel territory. And rebels seek to eliminate such threats. The One we follow was crucified, remember.

So suffering has a multiplicity of sources. And from whatever source it comes, it is painful and the enduring of it is costly. So we seek to protect ourselves. We have devised countless prescriptions, diets, exercises, programs and counsels to save us from the pain to which flesh and spirit are heir. We have developed social policies to make life easier on ourselves, to avoid having to bear responsibility for our choices and actions, to have now what we cannot afford by putting off payment for it down the line. We avoid facing things head on with others, we avoid dealing with difficult matters; we lie, we cheat, we steal; we compromise the truth.

But what a danger there is in all this pain-avoidance! An exceptional novel of philosophy, satire and spiritual depth published in 1932 makes this clear. It is **Brave New World**, written by the brilliant English intellectual, Aldous Huxley, who died in 1963. This novel has turned out, I think, to be prophetic, as one looks at our present society and portions of the Church. The society of Huxley's brave new world has designed itself for pleasure and comfort, eliminating possibilities that may result in pain, of whatever type, from whatever source. And people are like zombies, automatons.

A young man objects to this state of affairs, crying out, “I don't want comfort. I want God. I want poetry and choice and freedom and danger.” The man-in-charge replies, “That means you also claim the right to grow old and ugly, have cancer and go hungry and suffer every possible pain.” To which the young man responds, “Yes! I claim them all!”

On my stronger days, I know the young man is right. I pray God to keep me in that recognition and to empower me to live out of it. For the truth, the gospel truth, that young man expresses is that suffering should NOT be the criterion for writing one's life. Suffering is NOT something to be avoided at all costs.

Instead, suffering is something to which we have a “right” **IF** we want fully to live and to become our true selves, the selves God made us to be. How disordered our perceptions can be: we fear we

will miss the meaning of life if we miss one of its pleasures or must endure much of its pain. The reality is that we run a far greater risk of missing that meaning if avoiding suffering is one of our primary goals. For to avoid suffering we will have to pass by much of life.

Consider: If avoiding suffering figures preeminently in your life's equation, you will never fully love nor plumb the depths of friendship. For to love is to be vulnerable: vulnerable to the pain of disappointment ... vulnerable to the pain of being betrayed by one's lover ... vulnerable to the pain of having to *build* a life with someone instead of having it given to you easy ... vulnerable to the pain of having to reconstruct your life together after you've both beaten up on it ... vulnerable to the pain of having to say good-bye to those you love at death's door. If you will not look suffering and death full in the face and take them in your arms, you will know neither life's full face nor embrace.

We Christians know this, however much we, along with our fellow human beings, do not like this. We know this because our lives are wrapped up in Jesus, who demanded for himself God his Father rather than comfort ... who demanded full abundant life instead of life lived in the fear of death ... who loved us so much he would not hurt us but would suffer our hurt of him.

Jesus did not know he was our savior *in spite of* his suffering. Jesus knew he was our savior *because* he had to suffer, because he would not let suffering figure in his life decisions. Last week you heard him say this to those disconsolate disciples who on the first Easter Day walked morosely away from Jerusalem, believing that if Jesus had really been the Savior he would not have suffered pain and death. To them, Jesus said, "*O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?*"

Now, Jesus did not seek suffering. We know he dreaded the final agony, even praying that the cup of pain be removed from him. BUT HE DRANK IT: That is the point. Suffering came to Jesus because he chose to live life to the full, he chose not to let death define his life nor keep him from being faithful to who he was: Son of the loving, saving Father...Redeemer of hating, rejecting man.

So Jesus claimed the right, indeed the privilege to suffer: to suffer being misunderstood, to suffer being thought a fool, to suffer being thought mad, to suffer sadness, to suffer being feared and hated, to suffer being betrayed and abandoned by friends, to suffer being despised by those he came to help, to suffer being murdered. And when we challenged Jesus to come down from the cross, he refused to budge because he had earned the right to be there.

He had earned the right to be there. Does that sound strange to you? It would have to me if I had not had the good fortune early in my life to know a woman who knew this, who had lived her life as best she could out of the pattern taught her by her Savior Jesus. Formed by a fair share of adversity, was she a sad, morose person? Not at all. She was without a doubt the most joyous, enjoyable, loving person I yet have met. People gathered to her like moths to light, basking in the pleasure and refreshment of her company. Young people adored her. She was fun. She was my grandmother.

A few years before her death at age 70, a friend asked her, "Lydia, for goodness' sake, why don't you

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have a face lift? You were such a lovely woman. Now you've got all those wrinkles." My grandmother replied, "Why would I do something like that? I've earned every one of these wrinkles; they are the witness to the fact that I've lived. I'm not going to let anyone rob me of them."

This is the Season of the Resurrection. You and I might think that Jesus conquered death by rising from it. Not at all. Jesus conquered death by dying, by not letting his life be defined or limited by death or by any of the suffering which came to him as a consequence of living life to the full and in accordance with his identity as his Father's Son and our Savior.

Resurrection, you see, was a sheer gift to Jesus, a gift from his Father, a gift for his bravery, his courage. And resurrection, he has promised, will be his Father's gift to us, IF we will follow him, letting the life he poured out on us from the cross strengthen us to live lives of abundance and of integrity, regardless of the suffering which may come to us because of this.

Let us not forego our right, our privilege, to suffer. If we follow Jesus faithfully and well, we will earn it. And like the scars on his risen, glorified body, our suffering will enrich the beauty and the glory which will be ours in eternity.