

5TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
OUR SUFFERING AND HIS COMPASSION

*“They brought Him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and He cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; He cast out many devils”
(Mk. 1: 32-34).*

In his book, A Grief Observed (1960), the renowned Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis recounts his personal experience with suffering and pain as he explores his journey of grieving and closure after the death of his beloved wife, Joy. His personal experience rocked his rational faith. At some point, he gives vent to his inner anger: *“Where is God? Go to Him when your need is desperate when all help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”* But Lewis never abandoned his faith in a just, merciful and loving God. He believed that his undying love for his wife would endure and be fulfilled in God’s eternity. The Readings of today bring us to a deeper reflection on the problem of human suffering, and God’s response to man’s cry at those times of need. The First Reading from Job (7: 1-4, 6-7) reminds us of the entire gripping story of the Job which always raises the question: *“Why do the just suffer?”* This particular pericope that we read today expresses the depth of Job’s seeming pessimism in his period of suffering: *“Is not man’s life on earth nothing more than pressed service, his time no better than hired drudgery? ... Restlessly I fret till twilight falls ... Remember that my life is but a breath and that my eyes will never again see joy”* (Job 7: 1, 4, 7). Job, we remember was a very wealthy man, *“considered the greatest man among all the people of the East”* (Job 1: 1-3). In a day Job lost all he had including his seven sons and three daughters. He was then inflicted with *“festering sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head”* (Job 2: 7). His wife and friends accused him of sinning against God and asked him to curse God and die or confess his sins. It was the belief of the time and still held by some to this day, that suffering is a punishment from God for sins committed against Him. But *“In spite of this calamity, Job did not sin or accuse God with wrongdoing”* (Job 1: 22).

Job’s and C. S. Lewis’ experiences resonate with some of our griefs, especially at this time when many individuals and families have been inflicted by the devastations caused by a coronavirus. Like them, we have been pushed down the ebb of hopelessness by our circumstances and compelled to ask: *“Where is God?”*

These cries of pain, desperation and struggles are real to every Christian. They are the crosses we must carry. Our Lord Jesus did; and He cried out too: *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* (Matt. 27: 49). Thus, there is nothing wrong in expressing this human weakness; but let us surge for The One Who died and rose again to set us free. The perseverance and hope in God that Lewis and Job demonstrate in the face of their suffering and loss should give us reasons to trust that there is a bright end to our tears and groans for those who wait on the Lord. Though the walk may be long, on winding rough road and the burden too heavy for us, let us find a voice to sing with the Psalmist (Ps. 146: 3) *“Praise the Lord Who heals the broken-hearted.”*

In the Gospel (Mk. 1: 29-39), Jesus gives us more reasons to trust and be hopeful. After an exhausting Sabbath day in the synagogue where He taught and healed the lame man (Last Sunday’s Gospel, Mk. 1: 21-28), Jesus goes straight to the house of Simon and Andrew, most likely to have some rest and a meal. For according to Jewish custom, the main Sabbath meal came after the synagogue service at noon. But instead of any of these, Jesus meets with Peter’s mother-in-law who lies sick in bed. Here, His service is needed. He responds immediately to heal the woman. That evening, *“they brought Him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and He cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; He cast out many devils”* (Mk. 1: 32-34). Here we see Jesus abandon His comfort to be with those who suffer. He stoops down to feel the physical, psychological and spiritual pains of all those who were brought to Him. Jesus’ response typifies selflessness, compassion and empathy that characterises His entire life and mission. The apostle Paul speaks eloquently of his joy in living a life of imitation of the Master by making himself *“all things to all men”* (1 Cor. 9: 22). In Christ, as in the apostle Paul, we see a compassionate loving God who stoops down from heaven and sees the sufferings of His children. Did He not promise: *“I will be with you always”*? Did God not say *“When you pass through the waters I shall be with you”*? God never leaves us in our times of suffering – He lifts us, giving us the fortitude to persevere and carry the crosses that must come. Jesus’ action demonstrates one of the many responses of God to human suffering.

My dear friends, be patient with God and with yourselves. Do not be disappointed because we cry out under the weight of our cross yet heaven seems silent. Do not be discouraged in yourself when your faith drips and begin to sink in doubt. Rather,

always remain positive, for perseverance will win you your life (Lk. 21: 19). By maintaining a stoic attitude, we will be able to help those who are in similar or worse situations and respond to them as the Lord Jesus expects of us. Let our crosses be veritable sources of inspiration and motivation so that we could be impelled by that inner strength to be with the people around us who suffer. May the grace of God be sufficient for us.