

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-FEBRUARY 7, 2021

READINGS: Job 7:1-4, 7-6;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 147;

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23;

Gospel of Mark 1:29-39

Our Compassionate Community Heals

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought our attention to an important reality of our humanity-- suffering. We might have seen on our television and might have read in our newspapers how the pandemic has brought suffering not only to the COVID-19-afflicted and their family members but also to those who care for them. Last week there was an article on the front cover of one of our newspapers with the title "I just want it to be over". This article described how the second wave of COVID-19 has affected the lives of the staff caring for the sick at North York General's Intensive Care Unit (ICU). The work in the ICU has brought the staff pain and feelings of burnout. The staff feels like "there is no end in sight". One staff was quoted as saying that "You don't forget the terror in your patients' eyes... the words they've spoken to their family before you put them on life support". The article described the suffering and the pain that the health care workers face in their work.

On this Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Church has provided us with three readings inviting us to reflect on the spiritual significance of suffering from the perspective of our faith tradition. We begin with the first reading from the Book of Job. The Book of Job was written after the Babylonian exile around 500 BC. The Book had been written in the form of a debate over the problem of the suffering of the innocent. At the time of writing the Book, the author and the people of his time believed that suffering was a punishment from God and that innocent people would not suffer. Job was a pious and God-fearing man. He was wealthy, had a large family and had an extensive property. He suffered a sudden and complete reversal of fortune. He lost his children, his property and was afflicted by a loathsome disease. Nevertheless Job didn't complain against God. Some friends had come to visit Job and to grieve with him. One of the friends Eliphaz, expressed the belief of the time that Job must have sinned or he would not be suffering.

Today's passage is part of Job's response to Eliphaz. Job didn't understand why he was suffering and he protested his innocence. His suffering had made him see life as full of pain and emptiness. Life held no meaning for Job. He longed for death to bring

an end to his suffering. Job saw his life as a life without hope. He was filled with sorrow and mental anguish.

The story about the suffering of Job leads us to the Gospel passage from Mark. Today's passage comes immediately after the passage we read last week. We heard how Jesus' teaching and his acts of deeds made a deep impression on the people in the synagogue. Today's passage begins with, "As soon as Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew". The Evangelist Mark is alerting us to the fact that today's narrative was about the events that took place on the same day-- on the Sabbath. The Evangelist focused on the teaching and healing of Jesus. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of a sickness.

The news about this healing had gone out to the people in Capernaum. They have found somebody who could help heal the suffering. However, because it was Sabbath, the people had to wait till sunset before they could carry the sick around. They brought many sick people to Jesus to be healed. The situation looked like "the whole city gathered around the door" of the house where Jesus stayed. There was so much human suffering in Capernaum that everyone wanted to see Jesus. Despite the great need of help for the suffering in Capernaum, we hear that Jesus decided to go to the neighbouring towns saying, "So that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do".

We might be wondering why Jesus decided to leave behind the multitude of suffering people in Capernaum for the surrounding areas? At the beginning of his Gospel, the Evangelist Mark identified Jesus as the "Son of God". The Evangelist continued to depict Jesus as the Son of God whose ministry was to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the Evangelist had identified Jesus' ministry as the proclamation of the good news accompanied with his acts of healing. The people however, saw Jesus differently. They saw Jesus as a worker of miracles. The people didn't understand who Jesus was. They knew nothing about his mission. They were looking for Jesus because they needed him for his miraculous power of healing and not as "the Son of God" proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

Proclaiming the Gospel in his time is what Paul talked about in the second reading. There is a theme of suffering in this passage from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Paul described how he suffered by preaching the Gospel. He had labored like a slave. He had been misunderstood and often unappreciated. Paul told the early Christians that he had made a lot of sacrifices to proclaim the Gospel by becoming "all things to all people", that he might save some.

My brothers and sisters, what do we learn from today's readings about suffering? When we do the readings in the light of each other we can learn that suffering is part of our human condition. The readings tell us that suffering is an unavoidable element of the human condition. Suffering reveals that our existence is fragile-more fragile than most of us would admit. Suffering is part of our lives. Suffering appears

in many forms, such as the sickness we see in this pandemic. Even during the pandemic we need to keep in mind that suffering also comes from famine, severe poverty, homelessness, injustices, oppression, tragedy, persecution and war.

So how do we respond to our suffering and to the suffering of others? When we experience suffering, we might tend to find a reason for the suffering. We might also have the tendency to explain away our suffering and the suffering of others. When we find no answers to our suffering and the suffering in the world, we might experience spiritual torment. We might even tend to question our faith and the meaning of life.

The Evangelist wrote his Gospel to teach that Jesus' miracles were not random acts of mercy: the miracles carry a message. The message was that suffering was not intended by God, and indeed God's intention is that suffering be ended. Today we heard how Jesus healed many. This was Jesus' response to suffering. He healed and he preached the good news of God's redemptive love from one village to another. The preaching and the actions of Jesus were like seeds scattered wherever he went. The seeds sprouted into communities of disciples who would do as Jesus had done. The health care workers in the story that I shared with you earlier are responding to the suffering during this COVID-19 pandemic. They are continuing the healing with compassion through the sacrifices they make. As Christians we are called to continue in the ministry of healing that Jesus began. As members of a believing community, we continue with the works of God's redemptive love to the suffering by reaching out to those who suffer with compassion and caring. Let us ask God to teach us to respond to the needs of the suffering with our actions that reflect his hope, love and compassion.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

(Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance)