

May 19, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The fastest growing religious choices in the United States is the group called the “nones”. Not “nuns” the religious sisters, but the people who when are asked, “What is your religious preference?” they respond, “none”. There are two major reasons why this reality is growing so rapidly. The first is that more and more people, especially young people, are saying that they no longer believe in God, even if their parents raised them in a Church. The second reason is that people cannot make sense out of the teaching that God is love and the reality of suffering. How could a loving God permit the suffering that happens all the time?

St. Francis de Sales says that God will either take away our suffering or give us the strength to endure it. No one wants to suffer, Jesus himself asked his Father that the cup of his suffering pass when he was in the garden of Gethsemane the night before his death on the cross. Out of love he then said, “Not my will, but your will be done.” Jesus’ message of love that we hear in the thirteenth chapter of John’s Gospel today is simple but that does not mean that it is easy to live out. When we decide to follow Jesus, we then commit to love not in just in any way, certainly not our way, we commit to love the way he loved us. That changes everything since his love for us included suffering and death.

When we read the Acts of the Apostles, as we do at every Mass during the Easter Season, we will see a certain pattern arises. The Apostles not only accept suffering as a part of what it means to follow Jesus and preach his name, they even rejoice that they get to suffer for him. They understand what Jesus means when he says to love one another as I have loved you. Here in Acts chapter 14 Paul and Barnabas instruct a considerable number of disciples, “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Here is how St. John of Aliva describes the faith of the Church: “Dear brothers and sisters, I pray God may open your eyes and let you see what hidden treasure he bestows on us in the trials from which the world thinks only to flee. Shame turns into honor when we seek God’s glory. To those who suffer wounds in fighting his battles God opens his arms in loving tender friendship, which is more delightful by far than anything our earthly efforts might produce.”

The wisdom of the world will always say that suffering should not exist, and certainly, we who follow the commandment of Jesus to love others as he as loved us will do all we can to comfort those who suffer and to do all we can to prevent suffering from happening. An example is that happened just yesterday when St. Louise Parishioners joined five other congregations, including Jews and Muslims, to repair homes and clean up yards of low-income elderly and infirmed. The wisdom of the Gospel embraces reality as it is. There is a saying that goes, "The Kingdom of God is already here, but not yet." The Kingdom of God will be fully here at the end of time. Then, as we hear in the book of Revelation today, God "will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain." That is what we mean by "not yet." Here is what we mean by, "already here": Revelation also says, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race." That is why Fr. Francis de Sales says that God will either take our suffering away or give us the strength to endure it, that is why St. John of Aliva says that suffering that we can't avoid is a hidden treasure that allows us to enter the Kingdom of God. I would add *the Kingdom of God here!* Jesus transforms everything through his suffering and death on the cross. He is the one who transforms even sin and death of this world into an offering of love. When accept Jesus' way of life, suffering, sin and death no longer have power over us, and we freely embrace suffering in love to give glory to God's name. For those of you who remember Fr. Phil, he would say, "That takes faith." Not everyone will accept this message, but those who do, will be completely transformed by it.