

A Suffering World

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

October 17, 2021

Fr. Tony Davis

There is a lot of suffering in our world. Oftentimes, our suffering is beyond our control: a cancer diagnosis, a global pandemic, a natural disaster, or an oppressive structure. Whenever these trials come our way, we immediately pray for God to take them away. As we know from experience, God usually does not answer these prayers.

Our scripture passages this weekend confirm that suffering is a necessary part of life, one that not even God's people are exempt from. Speaking of the suffering servant, the prophet Isaiah in our First Reading said, "through his suffering, my servant shall justify many and their guilt he will bear." In our second reading from Hebrews, the author says, we have a great high priest who "has similarly been tested in every way." Finally, in our Gospel, Jesus asks James and John, "can you drink the cup that I will drink?" All three readings tell us that life is not a question of whether or not we will suffer. It is a question of what we will do with our suffering.

The priest and spiritual author Richard Rohr believes that suffering can actually be one of our greatest teachers in life. If we allow it to transform us, it can break open our hardened hearts, make us more reliant on God, lead us to make better lifestyle choices, and help us be more empathetic and compassionate towards others. Unfortunately, many people do not want to learn from their suffering. They would rather avoid it. Sadly, as Fr. Rohr says, "if we do not allow our suffering to transform us, we will surely transmit it."

Transmitting our suffering to others is all too common today. Instead of dealing with it, we unfairly pass it onto others. For example, if we are miserable, we try to make other people miserable; if we don't want to take responsibility for our actions, we blame other people; if we do not want to discern God's will, we adopt all or nothing thinking; if we do not want to listen, we jump to conclusions. All of these are ways that we add to the suffering of the world. Unlike the sufferings beyond our control, however, these are things within our control.

Jesus, our great high priest who has been tested in every way, shows us how to deal with our suffering. As Fr. Rohr writes, "Jesus receives our hatred and does not return it. He suffers and does not make others suffer. He does not first look at changing others; he pays the price of change within himself. He absorbs the mystery of human sin rather than passing it on." (*The Wisdom Pattern*, 39) In other words, as the one who came to serve, not be served, Jesus allowed suffering to stop with him. He took it in and did not pass it on to others. This is most clearly seen on the cross. As Christians, we should follow Jesus' example.

While we cannot get rid of suffering in our world, we can refuse to transmit it onto other people. Whenever I suffer, do I unfairly take out my frustrations on others? Am I able to hold my suffering long enough for it to transform me?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that our sufferings may transform us and that we may not transmit it to others. We already have enough suffering in our world as it is; we should not be adding even more.