

## Homily Sunday 29B: 21 Oct 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

It might seem a bit odd that God selected the Jewish people to be the chosen people. After all, Israel was never a mighty kingdom. If the Lord really wanted to show his power, why didn't he turn them into a global empire like Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon? Instead, he chose a people who started out as slaves to Egyptian overlords. Throughout their history they never rose to the ranks of the high and mighty. Quite the contrary. Most of their existence was spent trying to keep their own house in order and prevent outsiders from plundering it. Within a few centuries of its foundation, Israel was split asunder, conquered, and taken into captivity. By the time of the Lord's birth, it was just a vassal state within the vast Roman Empire. This curious state of affairs was not lost on the chosen people themselves. In fact, if there was anything the Jewish people could claim as a prerogative, it was, well, suffering. Slavery, oppression, exile, etc. were very much part of their history. Of course, these sad facts of life were not unique to the Jewish people, but because they endured for so long, their suffering became part of their family narrative as it were. So you find lamentations and psalms laden with sorrow in their holy books, what we Christians have come to call the Old Testament.

Today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah is a milestone in the process of the revelation of God's holy will to his beloved people. The prophet speaks of how this figure of the suffering servant will justify others by his own travails. His sufferings acquire a kind of cultic significance, they become a sort of religious offering for sin. The servant offers himself as a religious sacrifice which atones for the guilt of the many. Of course, as Christians we see this a prophecy of the passion of the Christ. When we move into the gospel selection, we see that Jesus does indeed utilize this idea in explaining his own Passion. He is to give his life as a ransom for many in an act of ultimate heroic service. Further, he summons his glory hungry apostles to follow his example. When John and James come seeking seats of honor beside the Lord, he challenges them to seek first to share in his suffering, speaking of it in the sacramental language of sharing in his baptism and drinking of his cup.

These insights into suffering are of particular importance to us, especially during this Respect Life month when we are reflecting on the various threats to the right to life. One area of particular concern is at the end of life, when human beings are beset by sufferings in both body and spirit. People at this stage are vulnerable to the temptations to suicide and euthanasia. This temptation is stronger nowadays because our irreligious culture finds nothing of value in the experience of finitude that suffering entails. And so by a very sad logic many are tempted to terminate a life whose continuance seems an absurd cruelty for everyone involved. Yet our faith teaches us an entirely different lesson. Namely, that the suffering of one man redeemed a fallen world. We all know that Jesus did lots of wonderful and glorious miracles throughout his public ministry when he was healthy and strong and seemed invincible; he gave inspiring sermons filled w/ divine insight. But all those eye-popping wonders were merely signs pointing to something

far greater. What opened the gates of heaven to our fallen race, what reconciled sinful people to their all holy God, was the passion and death of Christ on the cross. In today's gospel, Jesus is trying to teach his apostles that they have to keep the cross in front of their eyes. If they really want to be close to the Lord and they really want to make a difference for God, then they have to embrace the sufferings that come their way. For it is by accepting these afflictions--whether they come from overt persecution or are just the normal misfortunes of daily life--that disciples can enter into deeper communion with Christ and make the transformative power of his grace more active in the world. I think this awareness should totally renew our perspective on death and dying. If accepted in a spirit of faith, suffering can become a force for good, both for the one who suffers and for everyone else. Let's pray that this Eucharistic sharing in the passion of Christ will help us to embrace our crosses, even when they weigh most heavily at the end of life's day, and through this act of heroic Christian patience may we make Christ more present in the world.