

August 25, 2019 Discipline as a Blessing Homily: In Shakespeare's classic tragedy, Hamlet, words spoken by the tragic hero to his mother, the queen, have puzzled contemporary Shakespearean scholars. In a pivotal scene, Hamlet, after committing the foul deed of murdering his uncle, exclaims, "I must be cruel, only to be kind". It is as if Shakespeare is of the view that it is necessary to cause someone discomfort, even pain, for his own good. No wonder that scholars are mystified. How are we to interpret his words?

As strange as it must seem, let us turn to the author of today's second reading for guidance.

In the 12th chapter of the letter, no fewer than ten times is the word "discipline" used by the author. In Latin the word is "discipulus", and means "one who learns." A related word, disciple, appears frequently in the bible, particularly in the New Testament. Needless to say, in our modern culture of comfort and pleasure, discipline, and in particular, self-discipline, are unwelcome and usually avoided. But as the writer to the epistle reminds us, discipline is an essential part of true love. Recall his words of exhortation: "Do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him. For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines". (Heb.12:5) It must always be understood that discipline is a necessary instrument of our spiritual formation in the faith.

Ask a coach, a parent or a teacher if discipline is not indispensable in the training of a young person. For an athlete to succeed on the field or on the court, he (or she) must first undergo rigorous training. The often heard mantra, "No pain, no gain", is repeated ad nauseam by a coach to the members of his team and serves as a warning that without effort and sacrifice, they are doomed to failure.

In order to get the very best out of her students, a teacher will insist on discipline. If the student is punished, it is only because the teacher desires positive results. If the student fails to work to the best of his ability, he alone suffers and forfeits an opportunity to grow in knowledge and maturity.

The trials and tribulations of life are an integral part of our education under God. Once again, let us consider the words in today's second reading, "All discipline seems a cause not for joy, but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful joy of righteousness by those who are training for it". (Heb.12:11)

By accepting Divine discipline, a Christian is truly blest, indeed. In the midst of life's many challenges, we look to the Lord as the Father who, in his mercy, is disciplining us. The Psalmist learned from his afflictions. In one of the Psalms, he writes, "It was good for me to be afflicted, that I may learn your statutes". (Ps. 119:71)

Misfortunes in life can easily weaken one's faith and lead to despair. But what if, in the perspective of faith, we were to see the invisible hand of God at work guiding us, correcting us and training us. Only then we will find meaning and purpose in those very difficult moments.

By all accounts, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was one of the towering figures of the last century. A Russian intellectual, he was unjustly sent to a Soviet labor camp, the Gulag, in Siberia for his alleged political views after the Second World War. In one of his works of non-fiction he wrote of the human soul and barbed wire. The labor camps were indisputably hellish places of torment and deep suffering. Yet, in his book, the great man wrote of his ascent while imprisoned. He accepted his suffering as God's discipline and his faith was re-born. Amazingly, he was grateful for his time in the Gulag, which at the time of his incarceration, was one of the world's most appalling places.

"I must be cruel, only to be kind." If God seems cruel to us it is simply because we lack the perspective of faith and the role of divine providence in directing our lives. At the end of the day, we may see God as kind and merciful, even after accepting, no doubt with some difficulty, his divine discipline. Such is the lesson taught by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Amen!