

We have a great tradition in our parish, on Good Friday. Together with all our Christian brothers and sisters in this area we have what we call the "March of Witness". I believe it's a great thing, usually headed and organised by our parish community. This is an annual march on Good Friday. We literally block the whole of the service road on the other side of Whitehorse Road, and then march. On a truck is loaded a heavy cross, and over a thousand people, children, adults, men and women, and their pets – sometimes, we all follow that cross. I sometimes wonder about the passing traffic, because there will always be a constant flow of traffic on Maroondah highway. What would they think of the people walking on the side of the street? Are these people mad? Why do these people have to generate this cross? Why do we have to proclaim suffering as the way of Christ. Is there something fundamentally wrong with us Christians, in following the cross.

Today's first reading opens with a dramatic accusation. I like this prophet. I think I have told you so many times that Jeremiah is my favourite prophet. He makes the accusation against God: "O God, you have seduced me, and I was seduced". Very strong language. He is accusing God of deceiving him in the strongest sense: "You have seduced me, and I was seduced". And what is the problem here? Well, Jeremiah goes to tell the people of their problems and how God was going to punish them with exile and defeat. The people don't see this, because life goes on as normal as ever, and Jeremiah's words are deflected, and he is seen as a fool, somebody who has lost it. And they treat him like rubbish. So, he runs to God and tells God: "You asked me to take this message to this people, and they think that I am mad. So, faced with his own suffering against the suffering of the people, Jeremiah now comes to argue with God: "Why did you send me as a messenger of suffering". Jeremiah could not accept it. But he goes back, and the first reading very clearly tells us: "I can't do this. I can't bury it within me because it is like a fire within me. So, I'll take this message again.

I feel for Peter in the Gospel today. Peter is, frankly, appalled at the prospect of Jesus's suffering and death at the hands of the chief priests, the elders and the scribes. Peter cannot accept it. I feel for him because, one minute, Peter is seen as the hero who knew the perfect answer. Remember last Sunday's Gospel. "You are Peter, you are the Rock, on you I will build my Church". So, the best student, the best disciple, he got it, he got it. But that does not last long because the next minute Peter is called "Satan". I don't know how Peter took it. But Peter's problem was: "You are the Christ, you can't suffer". And when Jesus calls him Satan, why does he call him Satan in the first place? Satan is the master of all lies. What is the lie that Peter is promoting here? For Peter, to be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ, means no suffering, eternal glory. You are the Messiah. You are the Saviour. Nothing can happen to you. We can sometimes carry that lie with us. Being a Christian mean "no suffering". When I suffer – "what's wrong with you God, why am I suffering?" Suffering is very much part of a Christian's life. And today's Gospel very clearly demonstrates that. When Jesus says: "If you want to be a follower of mine, deny yourself, pick up your cross, and then follow me". So, there is a good process here. Jesus does not mince his words. Suffering becomes part of being a Christian. Suffering is part of our life every day. And, these days, the suffering that comes with COVID-19 does not make sense. But, we as

Christians can see this suffering differently. The good thing about being a Christian is, we know that suffering is part of everybody's life, and our own life, too. The good thing is that we know that Christ is with us in our suffering. That Christ suffers with us. That Christ becomes the constant companion in our journey of suffering. Christ proves that he will be our strength. Christ proves that he has suffered and that, therefore, he understands the suffering, therefore he will journey with us. His power is mighty in our weakness. If the cross is the price to be paid for love, then carrying it is love's proof, in action. And Jesus is a companion in suffering – and that is enough. We can carry any amount of suffering, knowing that Christ is with us.

May the gift of faith give you strength and courage these days. May the gift of Christ give you more and more peace deep within you, so that you know that your suffering is not in vain. Your suffering is not wasted. Your suffering is, in fact, meaningful, because this will then lead us, and the world, to a better place. But always with Christ on our side.