

Sexagesima

Adversity

We ask, in the collect, to be defended from all adversity. We are not praying that life may be effortless. We are recognizing that adversity and anguish are constant facts of life. They are not hurdles to take in our stride. They are brick walls that bring us to a sudden stop. Adversity and anguish shake not simply our courage but our faith. No wonder we pray to be delivered from all adversity.

So we don't try to avoid all distressing experiences and only welcome what is comfortable because then we will not be alert to each others need. When it comes to bearing one another's burdens and supporting people in their agony we will be neither ready nor prepared. And on the day of judgement we will be condemned for lack of compassion and sympathy.

God's work in which we play our part is the very opposite of avoiding adversity or building defences against life. God doesn't want closed off people. He wants to take and break us and remake us which he does primarily at the Eucharist, taking bread, breaking bread. and feeding thousands with new life and enabling them to stand firm.

So we don't pray to avoid adversity. We pray to stand fast to be defended. Outside Christ, suffering is completely meaningless. With Him our sufferings belong to the world of glory. So much so that when we are first told this we may instantly experience calm. And it is those who are calm who are so useful in carrying the burdens so many people labour under - the sleeplessness, the worry, the anxiety, the sense of failure. It is simply not Christian to avoid other people's problems on the excuse that we have enough of our own.

So as Lent approaches we need a sense of proportion. We will resolve to keep our temper and develop some self control. But this is no more than the good practice of an athlete in training. These are not adversities. There is no reason to think we are pretty good christians. We have not yet resisted unto blood.

Sugar-less tea, early rising, people who get on our nerves are not to be counted as adversities. They are simply hurdles which any Christian ought to be able to take in his stride with the habitual grace of baptism.

If on the other hand God has allowed us to be confronted with some real adversity, then there is something in our lives that won't bear thinking of, yet something we can't stop thinking about, something that appears arbitrary and irrational. It knocks the bottom out of all our resolutions, and leaves us weak and despairing: this is not going to be dealt with by the simple rule of Christian self-discipline.

St Paul felt like this about his epilepsy. The Lord Jesus felt this about his approaching crucifixion.

We can overcome obstacles and it does us good to do so. But there is only one who can bring good out of something really evil and that is God. We haven't got the technique. We don't know how to even start on it. The only thing to do is what St Paul did - to draw near to Christ in his agony at Gethsemane, to make his prayer our own - not my will but thy will be done - and to wait with patience and hope for his power to place a tabernacle over us and his will to be made clear to our eyes.