

“I have been assigned months of misery, and troubled nights have been allotted to me” (Jb 7:3). The lament of Job could easily come from any of our lips. The pandemic has dragged on for close to a year. The lack of socialization from in person schooling has taken its toll on the young. Millions are unemployed and do not know how they will manage finances from one day to the next. More than 105 million have contracted the virus. 2.3 million lives are lost, and the end is not in sight. The world’s difficulties seem on a par with Job’s. And like Job we may express our own exhaustion: “I waste away: I will not live forever; let me alone, for my days are but a breath” (7:16).

After the lamenting come the questions on human suffering. Isn’t God just? Are we being punished for something? Do we need to repent? Haven’t we suffered long enough? So, what did Job do? What sin did he commit? We need to be careful with that line of thinking. Job didn’t break any rules. Bad things often happen to people who do not do anything wrong.

Job lives life with a clear conscience. He is a very good person. And yet his life has taken a tragic turn for the worse. Everything appears to be lost. Job is hurt and upset. He is angry and yet he continues to seek answers.

In the Book of Job, the central figure is God. The story is also about our inability to understand God’s ways. The Prophet Isaiah explained it this way: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways ... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (55:8-9).

Job did not sin. Job’s fate was a consequence of the devil betting God that he could get Job to be unfaithful. In his despair, Job argues with God, but he does not lose faith. He admits to God that he cannot survive on his own, that he is utterly dependent on God for everything and now even more dependent for his life. With this recognition, God concludes the test and Job who has proven himself like gold tested in fire finds himself more blessed than ever after all of the trials and tribulations.

The sad reversal of fortunes that happens to Job could easily happen to anyone. Loss of wealth, the death of family, the destruction of a home, a severe loss of health. Just look around, if it has not happened directly to you, it has probably happened to someone you know and care for deeply. What did I do wrong to deserve this? Why won’t God help me? Why doesn’t God cure all suffering? Why doesn’t he put an end to the pandemic and all of humanity’s ills?

In illness, we experience powerlessness, limitations, we may even glimpse death. Illness can make a person more mature, helping us discern in life what is most important. Illness can also lead us in the opposite direction. It can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even revolt against God. As I visit those who have been estranged from their faith, very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.

Jesus knows the pain of suffering. “Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed.” (Isa 53:4-5).

Jesus responds to suffering with compassion. He healed the sick by treating the whole person, not by curing the illness alone. Jesus healed many as we hear in today’s Gospel: “they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons... He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons” (Mk 1:32-34). Jesus always responded to faith. He cured many, but he did not cure all.

The miraculous healings of Jesus are signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announce a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death. On the cross Jesus took upon

himself the whole weight of evil of which illness is only a consequence. By his passion and death on the cross, Jesus has given a new meaning to suffering.

Suffering is a great paradox. We call on Jesus to relieve our suffering. Jesus calls on us to respond to others in their suffering with mercy and compassion. Certainly, we are not miracle workers, but we still have the capacity to heal through love, to heal through forgiveness, to heal through our attentiveness to one another. Love is the greatest gift of healing that God has given us. Use it wisely. Share it abundantly!

Jesus suffered unjustly. Like Job, he committed no sin. Jesus did not raise anger against God. Instead, He prayed for us. "Father forgive them, they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). When we see suffering, it is hard to understand why. But there is great peace in knowing that Love conquers evil. Christ conquers sin and death. Our noblest suffering united to Christ's is an act of love to make the world a better place. We share his Body in receiving Holy Communion. We are challenged to share in his suffering for the conversion of hardened hearts. "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you" (Jn 15:12).