

Bishop's Easter Message:

The Easter Meaning of Suffering

'Why is there suffering?' This is one of the great human heart questions. God reveals several answers in the scriptures. Easter reminds us of the greatest answer of all.

Christ-like suffering wins redemption

Prior to his sufferings, Jesus revealed a basic evangelisation spirituality principle [John 12:24]:

*In all truth I tell you, unless a wheat
grain falls into the earth and dies,
it remains only a single grain; but
if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.*

Jesus did not find it easy to accept the sufferings that were ahead of him. He pleaded to God the Father to be saved from them. In his great anguish, he sweated drops of blood [Luke 22:44].

When, like the grain of wheat, he died, his life and ministry seemed a failure. Though he had preached to great crowds, working many miracles and wonders, only his mother, John, and two other women supported him.

The Apostles, whom he had spent three years forming to lead his Church, had run away [Mark 14:43-52]. Peter, the appointed leader of the Apostles, even pretended not to know Jesus [Mark 14:66-72].

Yet, after he died, Jesus rose again on the Third Day. At Pentecost, the first signs of the 'rich harvest' became apparent. The Apostles were filled with heroic faith. Thousands who had seen and heard him converted [Acts 2:22].

The Easter meaning of suffering

The 'rich harvest', which came after an apparently failed ministry, testified to the truth of Jesus' prophecy. The harvest is the conversion which results from the action of God. Those who, like Jesus, offer their lives to God in self sacrifice, especially for those who have given up religious practice, also win a rich harvest, the conversion of others.

This basic evangelisation spirituality principle is particularly important for our Diocese. So many have drifted from the practice of the faith. This principle highlights the value of the sufferings of us all for the renewed conversion of others, including family members, friends, and fellow parishioners.

Part of our suffering can be the apparent failure of our efforts to bring others back to God. We may seem to have been no more successful than the dying Jesus. We need, therefore, to pray for Easter faith. This will preserve us from discouragement. It helps answer, too, questions such as: 'Are my efforts to bring others to faith achieving anything at all?'

What sufferings can we offer God for others?

Everyone has sufferings they can offer God for the conversion of others. First, there are the sick and frail.

Jesus seemed to be at his most powerless when dying on the cross, unable to move or to speak much. Yet this was the climax of his ministry, his most powerful moment of all from the point of view of winning others to God.

I am reminded of this image, and the evangelisation spirituality lesson it teaches, every time I meet stroke victims, people crippled with arthritis, those undergoing serious hospital surgery and other treatments, paraplegics in wheel chairs and the frail who need others to care for them. These people, often also unable to move or speak much, can be at the climax of their lives as evangelisers if, like Jesus on the cross, they offer their lives to God for others.

Second, there are those who learn they have a serious illness, and those who are dying. There are the grieving and the lonely.

Third, there are the sufferings of those whose efforts to bring others to God seem to have failed. I think of the dying Jesus when I hear parents and religious education teachers wondering: 'Did my efforts to bring children to faith have any value, for they seem to have no interest in faith?': 'Where did I go wrong?' Then there are the priests and religious who have given their lives to spreading the Gospel, like Jesus, and who may suffer the temptation of wondering what they have to show for their lives.

Fourth, there are the sufferings of daily life – teenagers experiencing self doubt and peer pressures, married couples struggling through the trials of relationships, parents providing for the varying demands of children. Single parents and those whose marriages have not worked out can suffer greatly. Then there are the trials of work and other responsibilities.

Times of insecurity too bring anxiety and other trials: retirement, unemployment, poverty, mental illness, financial insecurity and concerns related to being accepted as a migrant to Australia. A related suffering is the loneliness experienced by those living alone or who are losing their hearing or sight. Those in prison have their own kind of suffering to offer God for others.

Daily life also can bring burdens that involve long term sufferings. These include those of the married person caring for a spouse suffering dementia, parents caring for a child with a disability, and adult children who are the carers of aged and sick parents.

Finally, there are the sufferings of temptations – particularly against chastity, in a society that does not value human sexuality; against Christian witness, to people who do not value God; and against life, in a society that allows abortion. There are the challenges against chastity faced by the spiritually heroic with a homosexual orientation living chastely in a society that ridicules this.

The calling to rural priesthood

Priestly ministry in country parishes brings its own trials. There is the isolation required to minister to people in distant towns, and the potential for loneliness and some loss of morale caused by declining town and Church numbers.

Then there are other trials, which all priests share, but which can be more acute in country towns: lack of responsiveness by some, even rejection by others; travelling long distances only to find a few at Mass; the criticism of country town gossip; the loss of a family involved in the life of a parish.

Priests from other countries, called to our Diocese by the Lord, experience distance from families and family events. There is the pain of leaving behind parents, family members and friends to return from annual holidays.

Finally, there are the temptations against commitment in a world which imagines there can be happiness without commitment. These can include the struggles to remain faithful to priestly ministry, and to keep faith in the promise of Jesus: 'anyone who loses his life for my sake will save it' [Luke 9:24].

Let us proclaim the Easter meaning of suffering!

By instituting the Eucharist during the Last Supper, Jesus revealed that the meaning of his Easter sufferings was his self sacrifice to God. This was a ritual sacrificial meal. Jesus replaced the lamb, sacrificed in the Temple, with himself. He calls us to unite ourselves, especially our sufferings, with him in self sacrifice during each Mass.

Anyone who offers their sufferings to God for others who have given up religious practice can be an enormous spiritual resource for our Diocese. Suffering is a pure offering to God, whereas prayer and efforts to preach the Gospel can have mixed motives.

Let us all – priests and people – help anyone who is suffering to appreciate its Easter meaning. Let us urge them to offer their sufferings, like Jesus, to God for others – particularly in the Eucharist. Let us ask ourselves: 'What are the sufferings in my life now that I can offer to God for others, sufferings which can yield a rich harvest?'