

## **Suffering** – John 21:15-21, 2 Cor 12:1-10

Following the Lent theme – Freedom/Discipline/Action/Community – we come to SUFFERING.

Lou phoned me Friday saying she was SUFFERING herself – been in bed a couple of days dose of flu – really not up to taking this service this morning. And my being given such a cheerful and uplifting subject as SUFFERING really seems a bit like the shortest of the short straws. Suffering - one of the great questions – not just for Christians, but for all religions, as well as for secular philosophers. Why, if there is a good and righteous God, is there suffering? And if suffering exists, why, if God is all-powerful, does he not insulate his chosen people from it? And the fact is, the Jewish people, God's chosen, seem to have had more than their fair share over the centuries.

Expression – ‘a roller coaster ride’ (the budget/economy). Jewish people went through that.

There is the exile to Egypt, marked by years of suffering; the entry to the promised land; the oppression by the neighbouring tribes; freedom under the Judges; captivity and deportation to Babylon – ups and downs of a roller-coaster.

The OT book of Ecclesiastes asks questions about life and suffering; Job is the story of a man who is righteous in the eyes of God, yet Satan is permitted to torture him and make him suffer nearly to the point of death.

Out of the 150 psalms – the prayer and hymn book of Israel – some 40, nearly 1/3 are laments about suffering. Compare our hymn and chorus books today – were the Israelites really such a miserable lot? Suffering is part of life's experiences. Even Ps 23 ‘Lord's my shepherd’ is a roller-coaster with the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ half way through.

Then in the NT we have of course the death of Stephen, the persecution of the early church – so it goes on. Suffering is part of life, and the people of God are not to expect exemption!

Jesus warned and warned at length about the troubles that were to be expected. There's a whole chapter in Mt. (24) about the suffering and persecution that was to come upon his followers (in other gospels as well). Jesus didn't say ‘Follow me and have an easy life’. He said ‘take up your cross and follow me.’

Polycarp – Bishop of Smyrna – 90AD REM. He was nearly 90 yrs old, and was arrested for not offering worship to the Emperor and taken to the arena.

“The Proconsul tried to persuade him to turn, saying, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, ‘Down with the Atheists!’” Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, “Down with the Atheists!” “Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.” “86 years have I have served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?” He was burned alive in the arena.

And in the face of Jesus' words, and the experience of millions of Christian martyrs, we are amazed to see day by day, week by week, month by month hundreds, thousands turning to Christ and CHOOSING to do just that! We may think that the church of Christ is dying on its feet in the UK – and we have to undergo little suffering or harassment. But world-wide, in the face of Islamic persecution, bullying and discrimination by atheistic regimes and secular marginalisation the church grows and grows. And Christians suffer! Our prayer in the west is ‘Please, Lord, stop the martyrdom, stop the persecution’. Our brothers and sisters under these regimes pray ‘Please, Lord, make us strong and help us to spread the gospel.’

At least 16 people have been confirmed dead in twin suicide bomb attacks against two churches in the city of Lahore, Pakistan, on Sunday 15 March, and over 100 more were injured.

Fulani Muslim herdsmen killed at least 82 people and injured several more in an attack on 15 March against a mainly Christian village in Agatu, Nigeria. Storming the village at around 4 a.m., herdsmen killed anyone in their path and murdered scores of villagers as they slept in their beds.

Christian leader, Narmurad Mominov, was fined on 27 February after police officers raided a family home that he was visiting in Galkynysh, Turkmenistan. The house was searched and they were falsely accused of holding a religious meeting.

Paul knew all about suffering. As a top Jewish Pharisee, he was instrumental in persecuting the early church and gave his approval to the stoning of Stephen. After his conversion there was an amazing turn round – and I bet his orthodox Jewish companions made his life hell when he announced he would follow Jesus! Paul's life became one of suffering – hunger, cold, deprivation and brutality. He could so easily have stopped but chose not to do so.

In the passage in 2 Cor. 12 we have a very personal insight into Paul's life. He talks about the 'thorn in his side, the messenger of Satan.' It's obviously something specific. Many people have discussed what this thorn could be – illness, infirmity, depression, malaria, eye trouble, perhaps some irritating companion, someone has suggested it could have been his wife! The thing is – *we don't know* – and that's good! Because if we *did* know, it would either be something that afflicts us in a similar way ('I know just how he feels, because I suffer the same') or be something quite alien ('Don't know what he's got to complain about – my suffering is much worse'). It's enough to know that Paul, the super-hero, theologian, apostle, pastor, letter-writer, had some ongoing problem that caused him to suffer. And if we are to learn anything from this situation this morning, that's something we must look at.

A couple of weeks ago the subject was 'discipline'. Again, not a particularly welcome subject to study. But without discipline, a lot of things would be much more difficult. REM Furzton Lake on Friday – marathon. Walk – jog – run. Didn't matter their fitness *level*, their dedication was to build up strength to tackle a long run. And you have to think, why? What's the point? What's the point of punishing your body? What's the point of climbing a mountain? There must be easier ways of raising money for a charity. Afterwards there would be aching muscles and blisters – in short, suffering. The other people I've seen being put through the mill are army recruits.

Awoken at 3am, turned out of their tent, hiking miles across Dartmoor with a heavy pack, being screamed at by an NCO who they probably dreamed of murdering. Now that's discipline, but also suffering, because it pushes them to the limit, and they know that if they fall by the wayside they will have to do it all again – or fail. But of course there is a purpose – to make you fit enough. And afterwards you might well have some achievement to boast about – or to at least feel satisfaction. 'I got there – I did it all by myself!'

Paul though takes a quite different tack. He is happy to boast about his sufferings – the chapter before is all about the things he has suffered – these are his credentials. In Galatians he is happy to boast about the cross of Christ. But now he boasts about his *weakness* – which is a complete turn-around! A marathon-runner might display a cup, with some pride. Or you've slogged through a university course and display a graduation photograph, proud of your achievement. Or a passing-out parade from the armed services. You can even boast about your status or income with a flashy new car. Paul says that this 'thorn in the flesh' is given to stop him becoming conceited. He says these words which go against all our normal instincts. 'That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'

The thing is, to boast in our achievements and successes is human nature. And when the Lord uses us for his glory, there's something in us that wants us to claim credit for that ourselves. In our gospel reading, Peter had to be taken down a peg or two – or actually three – when Jesus asked him three times 'Do you love me – really and truly love me?' For Peter it was a reminder that he had vehemently denied three times even knowing Jesus. And when asked 'do you *truly love* me?' he can only reply 'you know I...*love* you'. It was suffering for Peter to be put in that position, but it was necessary to remind him before Jesus finally left him to be the cornerstone of the new church of people. I believe he would never forget it. And so when anyone complements any one of us about something that has succeeded for the glory of God, we must remember where the credit goes, and not bask in any admiration – no matter what it has cost us.

Join me now then as we come to God not just as individuals but as a corporate body of believers. Let's pray.

We all have our weaknesses

Thorns (physical, figurative, spiritual)

Temptation, pride, people, mental, slothfulness, apathy inactivity,  
unwillingness to trust in you

You allow this so that we will trust in you and not merely on ourselves

Teach us how to trust you

Teach us to boast in your grace and not in our own pious ways

If the thorns we are called to carry must not be removed from us then  
allow us to accept our weakness in your understanding and to claim the  
victory and the strengths that your grace will provide in its place.

Teach to boast concerning the work you perform in our lives not  
anything of our own doing

A blessing for each of us here your children – we come and humble  
ourselves before you today and affirm that will resist we will rebuke  
and we will engage the thorns of our lives in your name and for your  
name sake as you guide us Lord!

We'll be careful to always give you the honour and the glory for ever.