

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

There is an idea running through today's readings that relates to the way we face suffering, difficulties and opposition in life. A realist comes to accept that life is not a bed of roses and that hardship will inevitably come our way at different times.

Isaiah 53:10-11 The first reading comes from the anonymous Second Isaiah, a prophet of the Babylonian Exile era (587-539 B.C.), who sees the suffering of the Jewish exiles as part of God's overall plan. Our translation reads as if God was pleased with suffering, when, in fact, it refers to the long-term plan for the coming of the world of God, or the reign of God. The prophet's thinking is something like: God intends humans to be part of the world of God and since suffering is part of the human condition, it must be an integral part of the divine plan.

The theology here is that suffering becomes an act of atonement, that is, making reparation or payment for sin. The ancient Jewish sacrificial system was based on the theology that offences against the law of God had to be paid for, and humans had to offer something to God as payment. One way was sacrificing an animal or some libation; another way was undergoing suffering and offering it to God as an act of reparation. The problem with this kind of 'theology' is that God is ultimate perfection and does not need any form of payment from us. 'Payback' theology is pretty unsatisfactory, based on a simplistic and human-centred view of God, whereby we create God in our own image and imagine that God thinks like us.

The servant in today's reading is the collective exiled Jews, many of whom, especially the children, could be quite innocent and do not deserve to suffer. So, what happens to their suffering? The prophet is telling us that God accepts the pain of the innocent and it becomes instrumental in saving the nation in the long run. The suffering of the innocent becomes a guilt offering that makes up for the rebellious actions and sins of others. This has overtones of the lamb led to the slaughter, which is offered to God to make up for the hurt or damage done to God by human sin. It is as if God is made happy by the offered-up suffering of the innocent – an idea that betrays a naïve and inadequate view of God, the compassionate indefinable one.

Psalms 32/33 The responsorial psalm is a song of joy acknowledging the greatness of the Creator Lord and human reliance on divine compassion and help. The community singing this psalm in their liturgy are striving to keep alive, in the context of worship, their hope for justice, peace and love. The song ends in an expression of great optimism with the assurance that those who trust in the Lord and live committed to goodness will never be crushed but will live on in God.

Hebrews 4:14-16 The second reading continues the letter to the Hebrews or Jewish Christians and refers to Jesus as the supreme high priest. This is based on the theology of priesthood, which is that the priest is a go-between who functions on behalf of the people before God. The priest in ancient religions offers sacrifice of one sort or another to appease the god in question. The principle is, you can keep the god happy with sacrifices. The chief priest in the ancient Jewish system was the high priest, who, in a metaphorical sense, was closest to God. The analogy here, and it is only an analogy, is that Jesus is the supreme high priest, who, instead of having to offer repeated sacrifices, offered himself as the one perfect sacrifice, thereby eliminating the need for any further sacrifices.

The writer also makes the point that Jesus is best qualified to act as a go-between to God on our behalf because he knows the human condition having undergone human life with its joys and suffering, its temptations and weaknesses. In other words, we have an advocate who knows us perfectly and who can identify with our situation. This gives us every confidence and every reason to hope with enthusiasm.

Jesus exhibits acceptance and profound understanding

Mark 10:35-45 The gospel account is a curious little episode starring Jim and Jack Zebedee who are in the bid for business class seats in what they imagine is a fully-fledged kingdom, with a court of flunkies hanging about in a throne room. Have they ever got it wrong! And yet Jesus responds to them in the mildest way, exhibiting acceptance and profound understanding. He tells them they are unaware of what they are asking because the reign of God is governed by a complete reversal of human values. In fact, those who expect to be first by human reckoning will be last, and the last shall be first.

The challenge Jesus puts to them is a reminder that being close to him means drinking the bitter cup of suffering and undergoing the hardship and persecution that being a Jesus follower entails. They both declare they can endure rough times, but they have no idea what lies ahead. Jesus is saying that what they are asking for is not his to give. These are reserved seats that will be assigned to those who merit them.

Next, Mark tells us, when the others heard what the Zebedees were asking they became indignant. We get a glimpse here of sandpit behaviour and the politics of promotion. The sad reflection here is that we belong to a church where the politics of promotion are alive and well and fully functioning. Authority not genuine service has become a trademark. And yet 2000 years ago Jesus blew this thinking wide apart by declaring that the first among us 'must be slave to all.' After all, he himself 'did not come to be served but to serve.' In imitation of Christ we should all be towel and basin people, prepared to wash the feet of others without discrimination. Here Jesus is laying down the blueprint for serving leadership.

It is fascinating that we currently have discussion at all levels of Australian society about discrimination, but the gross inequality in our country bears witness to rampant discrimination, which is in direct opposition to the attitude of Christ. With our infantile outlook we seem incapable of accepting difference and we cannot look beneath the surface and respect the dignity of all other human beings.

Jesus' broad-minded approach to others was devoid of judgement and discrimination

We can easily forget that Jesus was heavily criticised in his day for being seen in the company of tax collectors and sinners. This was just an example of his respect for others and the desire to offer people the chance to move beyond an unworthy lifestyle into a life of growth toward wholeness where they could achieve their potential and become what they were meant to be. His compassionate attitude towards the disabled, the poverty-stricken, the anxious and the non-copers was counter-cultural. His broad-minded openness to children and women, who were at the bottom of his society, was totally devoid of judgement and discrimination. He was simply comfortable with everyone he came in contact with. Respect.

With the Plenary Council in progress we can only hope that the hierarchy of the future church in Australia will cultivate the permanent practice of being honest listeners, of imitating Jesus in his openness to transformative change and growth that will bring us closer to the values of Jesus Christ. It's hard to disagree with Cardinal John Henry Newman who said, 'To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.' You only have to look at the change of seasons and all of nature to appreciate this. There is no growth without change; none of us is the same person we were last Christmas. The hope is that we have grown better.

Today's gospel urges us to get outside ourselves and to meet the challenge to prioritise service over authority and winning. In our own small way, we can serve by showing respect and by genuinely listening to what others have to say.



A key element of respect is to do more listening than talking.

Anonymous

At the heart of life is service.

Mother Teresa

To bring joy to one heart through love is better than a thousand litanies

Sufi saying



My doctor tried kidnapping for a while, but nobody could read the ransom notes.

The wife smacks her husband across the back of the head. He says, 'Hey! What was that for?'

'That's for the piece of paper in your pants pocket with the name Marylou on it.'

He explains, 'That's from two weeks ago. I went to the races and Marylou was the name of a horse I bet on.'

She hits him again. He says, 'Now, what was that for?'

'Your horse called on the phone today.'

Laurie Woods