

This morning in our collect and our readings, we are reminded of some important principles of the Christian life. First we are reminded of the trials and struggles that we will most certainly face in our present lives in this world. But then we also remember that we are not alone in facing these trials. God is with us in the midst of the storms, and not only that, but God is always with us. It is through His faithfulness in the times of trouble that we come to realize that He is as faithful and He is as present with us every moment of our lives. And in time, we realize that God uses all of those trials to build His kingdom in us and through us. We realize that these struggles we face are an intrinsic part of saving the world. Through these trials, the lives of the faithful will bring forth good fruit for the Kingdom of God.

Now, we of course know that all of us will face difficulties in life. Some of these such as illness and death are merely things that happen to us. Some hardship are a result of our following Christ and obeying Him in spreading the Kingdom of God or to ministering to others. Often we see in the Psalms that David and the Kingdom of Israel is threatened by other people. There are infinite ways in which we can struggle – some which we bring upon ourselves, but also some things are forced upon us. There are infinite degrees of suffering. Maybe we are merely inconvenienced or maybe we face life and death situations. Regardless, all of us will struggle in this life.

Of course, not only is this principle universally applicable to all people now, but it is also applicable through all times. Ever since Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden, we have been subject to the sorrow of life. Our world is ruled by the creeping grip of death, and it is against this defect brought into the world by mankind, which we fight.

From today psalm, Psalm 71, we read a few verses that highlight this struggle:

1 IN thee, O Lord, have I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion,

\* but rid me and deliver me in thy righteousness; incline thine ear unto me, and save

me.

3 Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the ungodly,

\* out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man.

8 Cast me not away in the time of age;

\* forsake me not when my strength faileth me.

9 For mine enemies speak against me;

\* and they that lay wait for my soul take their counsel together, saying,

10 God hath forsaken him;

\* persecute him, and take him, for there is none to deliver him.

19 O what great troubles and adversities hast thou showed me !

And of course, in the epistle, we see the litany of struggles which St. Paul endured in his ministry of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles. He was whipped and beaten and shipwrecked. He continually faced perils in his missionary work. He was opposed by both enemies and sometimes even by those who had at one time labored beside him. And yet he was compelled to press on in the service of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament lesson also, repeats this theme of adversity, but highlights for us the adversity one faces when doing what God has called us to do. Particularly we think of Jesus in this text for He was compelled to obey God even when His obedience subjected Him to persecution, torture, and death.

5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not rebellious, Nor did I turn away.

6 I gave My back to those who struck *Me*, And My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting.

Christ sets the ultimate example of sacrificial service. He was the only righteous One, who

did not deserve any of the suffering of humanity, but endured the most suffering, taking our sins upon Him as the perfect sacrifice for us. If Jesus did not escape trials and hardships, then know that, as heirs of the curse of Adam, and also as Christ's followers, neither shall we escape struggle and strife. And it may likewise be concluded, that those who seek to serve Christ most devotedly, can expect greater hardship.

Of course the natural impulse would be to hold back from serving God with great fervor. Taking this approach, however, leaves us with an anemic faith, if one with such a disposition could even be said to be faithful at all. Recall that it is in the time of desperation that one learns Christ. When we are stretched, we learn to trust that God will give us strength. When we are weary from doing good, we learn that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. When we are abandoned and alone, we learn that God is present with us always. Such things and more are only learned through the refining fire of life. This is why I say that this life is our purgatory. We have to be melted in the furnace and poured out into the mold and shaped and polished and crafted to become the men and women that God wants us to be. None of this process is easy. None of it is painless. But all of it is needful. All of it is good, and transforms us into the holy people of God.

It is only in the trials that we learn to say with the psalmist:

IN thee, O Lord, have I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion,

\* but rid me and deliver me in thy righteousness; incline thine ear unto me, and save me.

2 Be thou my stronghold, whereunto I may always resort:

\* thou hast promised to help me, for thou art my house of defence, and my castle.

...

4 For thou, O Lord God, art the thing that I long for:

\* thou art my hope, even from my youth.

5 Through thee have I been holden up ever since I was born:

\* thou art he that took me out of my mother's womb: my praise shall be alway of thee.

It is only in the trials that we can say with the prophet Isaiah,

7 "For the Lord GOD will help Me; Therefore I will not be disgraced;

Therefore I have set My face like a flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed.

8 *He is* near who justifies Me; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand together.

Who *is* My adversary? Let him come near Me.

...

10 "Who among you fears the LORD? Who obeys the voice of His Servant?

Who walks in darkness And has no light?

Let him trust in the name of the LORD And rely upon his God.

Only when we come to the end of ourselves, only when all our resources are used up, only when we have nothing more to give, then we experience the reality of God's presence with us and learn that His strength sustains us. And then we learn the further reality, that it is only His strength and love that has always sustained us. When we were younger, we might have felt that we were the ones in control. We might have fooled ourselves into thinking that we really accomplishing quite a bit. Without hardships, we readily look at our efforts and think, "See all that I have done. Aren't I grand?" But when all of the efforts go up in smoke, when you get to the end and realize how transitory life is, then we finally see clearly. It is all of God. We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. If you want to know better the presence of God in your life, if you want to more fully trust in God, then you must go through the fire. There is no shortcut.

In the gospel this morning, from St. Luke chapter 8, we read the parable of the sower, probably better described as the parable of the soils because it is really about how we

individual human beings respond to the call of God, to Christ the Word proclaimed to us by the written and preached Word of God. Christ says there are four general categories of responses represented by different soils. Three of those soils do not yield any grain. The world, the flesh, and the devil, all conspire and work against us to prevent a harvest, to keep the Kingdom of God from growing.

Of course we desire to be the fertile soil. We want the implanted Word to grow in our hearts and to bring forth fruit. But sometimes, we act a little more like the soil on the roadside and we immediately reject the call of God to act. Sometimes our hearts may be a little rocky and those trials that we go through in this life shake our faith to the core and it starts to dry up and wither. Sometimes we become distracted by pleasures and riches. Our focus shifts from Christ, and our faith suffers. These various soils represent to us the various trials that we must face throughout our lives.

To keep the sprout of faith growing and vibrant in our hearts, we must tend to it. We must exercise our agency by getting ourselves to church, by keeping connected with God through prayer and a commitment to our parish and bible study and fellowship, and doing those things in life which we are called to do.

But let us always remember that it is God who gives the increase. Let us not worry and fret about those things that are beyond our power to address. All things are within God's power. The Father stayed with the Son during His passion, and Christ completed the work that He was given to do, thus redeeming the world. Christ was with St. Paul through all of his missionary journeys and through all of the hardships he suffered in the service of our Lord, and the Apostle brought forth a harvest of souls throughout the Roman Empire. And Christ is with us in all of our trials and struggles and work for the Kingdom as well.

2025-02-23

Sexagesima Sunday

K. Bartel, 6

God has our backs. So let us not turn from Him, but rather let us affirm more and more each day that we can, we must, trust Him. Let us not hope in ourselves. Let us hope in God. He is our refuge and strong tower. Trust Him, and in doing so we will be that good soil. We will be those who with an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.