

July 13, 2008 – 15th Sunday in OT A

LESSON: St Paul's Secret for Dealing with Suffering

Chapter 8 of St Paul's Letter to the Romans is one of the **most loved chapters** of the entire New Testament.

- ✍ In the previous Chapters, he explained that the Law of the Old Testament really didn't have the **power to save** us from sin.
- ✍ Its purpose was to help us **discover our need** for God's grace.
- ✍ And that grace has come to the world, more **abundantly** than anyone could have ever imagined, through **Jesus Christ**.
- ✍ In Chapter 8, Paul goes on to explain the **consequences** of all this for the struggles of life in a fallen world.
- ✍ His message can be summed up in two words: **limitless hope**.
- ✍ As long as we are **united to God's grace**, as long as we are **striving to live in friendship with Christ** through prayer, the sacraments, and the pursuit of virtue, there is **absolutely nothing** in this world that should weaken our **confidence in God**.

That is the **core message** of Romans, Chapter 8.

- ✍ In the passage we just read St Paul applies this **supernatural hope** to something we are **all** familiar with: **suffering**.
- ✍ In these verses, St Paul explains how **he** dealt with it.
- ✍ He writes: "I consider that **the sufferings of this present time** are as **nothing** compared with the **glory** to be revealed for us."
- ✍ He is not **belittling** the pain that suffering can cause us - he himself was slandered, flogged, imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, and rejected throughout the years of his ministry.
- ✍ He knows what suffering **means**.
- ✍ But he shows us **how to look at** our sufferings: from the perspective of **the whole story**.
- ✍ What God **has in store** for those who follow him faithfully, is **indescribably greater and longer-lasting** than the **worst possible** sufferings of this life!

That's the Pauline point of view, and **every Christian** can share it.

ILLUSTRATION: Jesus Agrees

St Paul didn't make this up; he got it from **Jesus**.

In the four Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, the word "heaven" appears **122 times**.

In almost **all** of his parables, Jesus is encouraging us to keep our attention fixed on **the big picture**, the whole story.

- ✍ In the parable we just listened to, for example, the motivating factor is the **abundant fruit** that eventually grows out of the seed that was planted in good soil.
- ✍ That seed had to dodge **three major obstacles**: the birds, the rocky soil, and the weeds and briars.
- ✍ Jesus tells us that those three obstacles stand for **three types of suffering** that can come to us:
 - ✍ the **devil** can attack us with deceptions and lies,
 - ✍ our own **selfish tendencies** can fill us with discouragement when following Christ gets hard,
 - ✍ and the **world around us** can sap our energy and faith with its cares, troubles, and seductions.
- ✍ And how does Jesus motivate his listeners to follow him **in spite of** all those difficulties and hardships?
- ✍ He turns their attention to the **end product**, to the **harvest**, to **eternal life**.

Jesus is **always** doing that.

Remember the **beatitudes**?

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God..."

Each beatitude teaches us to see our **struggles in light** of "the glory that is to come."

The **Church** teaches us the same thing. At every single Mass, we pray, "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil... and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope **for the coming of our Savior**, Jesus Christ."

We will find **strength and meaning** in suffering only if we look at it from **the true perspective of eternity**.

APPLICATION: Contemplating Nature

We would probably all agree that **keeping heaven's glory in mind** is, as St Paul teaches, a **powerful antidote** to discouragement in the face of life's sufferings.

But **how** can we keep heaven's glory in mind?

After all, we have never been to heaven!

One **tactic** for strengthening our **supernatural eyesight** is offered to us in today's **other Readings**.

- ✍ In the First Reading, God compares his **grace** to **rain**.
- ✍ Just as the **rain** never fails to make crops grow and bear fruit, so his **grace** makes virtue and wisdom grow in our hearts.
- ✍ Today's **Psalm** explains how "distant peoples stand in **awe**" of God's wonders, and then goes on to **describe** some of those wonders - the mysterious **rhythms of the changing seasons**.
- ✍ And the **Gospel** passage follows suit.
- ✍ In it Jesus uses an image taken from the **world of nature** in order to teach us a truth about the **Kingdom of Heaven**.

The common denominator is **clear**: the beauties and wonders of God's **creation** are **clues** to **God's own beauty, reflections** of the **glory of heaven**.

When we admire with a spirit of faith the **marvels of the natural world**, they can remind us that God is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-good.

And in that way they can help put our **sufferings and struggles** in proper, **Pauline perspective**.

They were all **made by God**, and so they all **bear God's fingerprint**.

- ✍ As Pope Benedict XVI put it:
- ✍ "The first visible sign of this divine love... is to be sought in creation and then in history. The gaze, full of admiration and wonder, will rest first of all on creation: the skies, the earth, the seas, the sun, the moon and the stars... there is a cosmic revelation, open to all, offered to the whole of humanity by the one Creator... **Thus, a divine message exists, secretly engraved in creation and a sign of the...loving fidelity of God who gives his creatures being and life, water and food, light and time.**"

All the saints discovered this. St Augustine put it especially well:

"Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky... question all these realities. All respond: "See, we are beautiful." Their beauty is a profession. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One who is not subject to change." (*St Augustine, Sermo 241, quoted in the Catechism, #32*)

Pope John Paul II also had a deep awareness of this:

"Faced with the glory of the Trinity in creation, we must contemplate, sing, and rediscover awe. Contemporary society has become dry, 'not for lack of wonders, but for lack of wonder' (G.K. Chesterton). Contemplation of the universe also means, for the believer, listening to a message, hearing a paradoxical and silent voice...

"Nature therefore becomes a Gospel that speaks to us of God: 'For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator' (Wisdom 13:5).

Paul teaches us that 'Ever since the creation of the world (God's) eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (Romans 1:20). But this capacity for contemplation and knowledge, this discovery of a transcendent presence in creation, must also lead us to rediscover our fraternity with the earth, to which we have been linked since creation (cf. Genesis 2:7). *(Pope John Paul II, General Audience, 26 January 2000)*

Today, during this Mass, let's ask Jesus for the grace [to see that **secret sign** of God's love], to see **all things** as he sees them, since that is the way they **really are**.