

## Redemptive Suffering

I used to think that Christianity was about saving us *from* our suffering. I have since come to learn that the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ saves us *through* our suffering. Suffering is an evil. But suffering can also school us in the virtues. For suffering reminds us of our vulnerability. Suffering forces us to recognize that we are not self-sufficient, but rather made for others, that we are dependent upon one another for our well being and our happiness. Suffering teaches us that salvation lies ultimately not in what we do for God, but in what God does for us and with us, through us and in us.

The first reading describes the plight of a scapegoat. Someone who is being shamed that others might feel better about themselves, someone who is being blamed so others don't have to have to feel guilty. But Isaiah the prophet does not pile on, rather he identifies with the scapegoat. The Spirit of God champions the scapegoat. He is his advocate. And so however bruised, our scapegoat does not break. He does not internalizes the shame and the blame being projected upon him, he keeps faith in the one who keeps faith with him. He keeps faith in his God who saves, even from this.

In the Gospel Jesus predicts that he shall suffer from the very kind of persecution Isaiah describes. And it is more than Peter can handle. Peter criticizes his Lord for indulging in such dark fears. Having just professed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah he cannot conceive of Jesus mission ending nailed on a cross. But Peter has much to learn. And the vehemence with which Jesus responds to him suggests that Jesus may still be learning too, that Jesus himself may not yet be altogether at peace with what awaits him.

“Get out of my sight, Satan! You are not judging by God’s standards but by man’s.” The words are addressed to Peter, but I like to think that they are also addressed to Jesus’ own fears, fears that reaches their climax in the Garden of Gethsemane where he pleads with the Father to take this cup of suffering away from him. I like to think that even Jesus does not embrace suffering with equanimity. How could he be fully human if he did not harbor such fears at the road ahead? But, as he closes his pleading at Gethsemane with the words, “not my will but thine be done” so here he rebukes Peter for judging according to man’s standards rather than God’s. Jesus does not *want* to suffer, but he is *prepared* to suffer if that is what it takes.

The saving power of suffering is one of the central paradoxes of our faith. Suffering can lead to withdrawal into our selves, but suffering can also be a powerful schooling in compassion.

Who better to have by your side in your own hour of suffering than one who knows what it is like by having undergone similar suffering themselves. So too, knowing what it feels like to suffer can inspire us to reach out to our neighbor whose suffering is reminiscent of our own. Even when we can do nothing to relieve our neighbor's suffering, we know from our own experience, that even our mere presence can act as a balm. And in so responding to the suffering of others, our own suffering finds meaning. As James notes today, it is through putting our faith into practice that we discover its true value.

The danger in suffering is that we withdraw and turn in upon ourselves, that we surrender our dreams and give up on ourselves. The Gospel is a proclamation of hope in the midst of such temptations to despair. Such hope is spread precisely in the turn away from ourselves and towards our neighbor in need. As Jesus rather graphically puts it, to be his disciple, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow in his footsteps. We find that as we turn our concern to the needs of our neighbor, we begin to forget ourselves, and our own burden lightens. In acts of compassion we thus not only comfort our neighbor, we relieve our own suffering as well.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples. He addresses the same question to each of us. And we might ask the same question to him; “who do you say that I am?” In our response to his question we will find the answer to our own.