

FIRST IMPRESSIONS FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
FEBRUARY 6, 2000

Job 7: 1-4;6-7 I Cor. 9: 16-19; 22-23 Mark 1: 29-39

Dear Preachers:

The reading from Job give the preacher an opportunity to discuss the mystery of suffering in our lives. It is a mystery and not a problem to be "solved," but it certainly is a subject well worth struggling with and one that will find, I think, eager hearers.

The Book of Job raises the question of innocent suffering. Satan, present in the Almighty's court, is given permission to afflict Job. We know the story of Job's loss of family, riches and his physical afflictions. His name has become synonymous with suffering. Remember, he is an innocent person. When his "comforters" come to tell him the stock answers, that he or his predecessors must have sinned and thus God is not inflicting punishment on the innocent, Job rejects this often-thought opinion. The passage we have today states that we do suffer and that there is no satisfactory answer for this suffering. It seems, Job says, that life is a meaningless cycle of misery. Let's stop here with this harsh sounding description of life. For those of us who suffer, Job is expressing what we feel, what seems to be the human condition.

He is voicing a complaint, or in biblical terms, a lament.

The preacher might reflect on this traditional prayer form---lamentation. A friend lost his beloved sister under tragic circumstances and said, "I prayed and complained to God for letting this happen." Many are afraid to "offend" God by voicing such a complaint. Maybe we feel like complaining to God, yet have been told, like Job, that we shouldn't and so we say nothing and carry our pain and feeling of rejection unvoiced. The death of good people and the suffering of innocent children is a scandal to all of us. (The preacher might list some current examples.) Whether personal examples, or those we witness on the evening news, come to mind, we certainly have plenty of examples of good people suffering. Even those who seem comfortable and not suffering physical pain, still know the pain of emotional suffering. We all shed the same tears; we all are linked by our human condition of suffering at one time or another in our lives.

Is Job despairing or lamenting? His prayer is a Lamentation, a complaint of a faithful person to God. It is a prayer of great faith for it expresses belief in the One

who is listening. It says that we are not alone as we cry out of the abyss, that our words do not fall on deaf ears. Job does not get a full answer from God in this book, but he does learn that God is not deaf and hears the complaint of this pained and trusting servant who will not accept simple answers about suffering. He speaks boldly to God in this book, it is a prayer of truth, a prayer of courage and a prayer of trust. For some of us it may be the only prayer we can pray at this time. It is better than silence, better than turning away from our God.

God doesn't cause cancer, accidents and the suffering of innocent people. Rather, the Gospel in its entirety, shows Jesus lightening our burdens. Jesus shares our life and knows how burdensome it can become. Many think suffering is the result of our sins. Certainly, much suffering is caused by our sin. We don't suffer because we have sinned, but sin certainly is at the heart of a lot of our suffering--there is racism, greed, lust, thirst for power, etc. We wonder why God doesn't prevent the suffering in the world. Facing this imponderable, a survey of Catholics I read says that, despite the suffering they experience, they still believe in God's love for them.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is shown healing, first Peter's mother--in-law, and then those brought to him at sundown. Notice that after he cures the woman, she gets up to serve. Mark is hinting that she becomes a disciple and that the process of discipleship is first the healing encounter with Jesus that enables service in his name. We, the church, the followers of Jesus, must recognize our responsibility to stop suffering as much as we can. In today's Gospel, Jesus is a sign of God's desire to deal with suffering. We do not deny the presence of suffering and the tragic in our lives, in fact, we do what we can to overcome it. But while Jesus deals with suffering and cures illnesses in these stories, he doesn't eliminate all pain from the world; somehow we deal with that suffering and its causes as we can, and are left with the awesome mystery of what remains.

We look at this Gospel of Mark in its entirety and notice that Jesus is constantly going somewhere. Today he says to Simon and his companions, "Let us move on...." His journey will take him to Jerusalem where he will share totally in our fate of suffering and death. But the story does not end there, it continues, after a waiting period, to the Resurrection. The Resurrection is hinted at in Jesus' cure of the mother-in-law, for the phrase "helped her up" is better translated, "raised her up" and this links this cure to the real completion of the mystery of suffering.

Maybe we can't answer the questions raised by suffering in our world. Though, like Jesus the Word made flesh, we can be there with those in grief--stand with

them, suffer with them and, when possible, do what we can to alleviate their pain. Our faith in Jesus, the one whom Mark promises will be more powerful, and will baptize us with the Holy Spirit, will strengthen us in this task of solidarity with those who suffer. The Eucharist we celebrate today, remember it is *broken* bread, reminds us that Jesus is here with us in our pain, helping us not to lose hope.

Perhaps suffering only finds final meaning in the redemptive and healing mystery of Christ's own death. His innocent suffering and death have put new meaning on our own. His suffering for the sake of others has a redeeming aspect to it and this is an even more profound mystery! In his own life, Jesus, like us, was repelled when he was confronted by suffering and death. He is steadfast though and continues to trust in God through it all. He will continue to pray to God, trust and walk forward to Jerusalem, showing us the path as he goes. We walk with him and he with us...we shed the same tears.

QUOTABLE:

The cure of Peter's mother-in-law is the prelude to a demonstration of Jesus' power over all forms of sickness and possession. There is a striking contrast between the public performance and that which takes place in the house in the presence of those already called to follow. In this latter instance Jesus takes the woman by the hand and "raises her up," an anticipated sharing of his resurrection power, to which she responds by ministering to him as the first deaconess of the church. The people outside on the other hand are excited and involved, but there is no indication of understanding or willingness to serve.

----Sean Freyne, in *SCRIPTURE DISCUSSION COMMENTARY 7: MARK AND MATTHEW*, Chicago: ACTA Foundation, 1971, page30.

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"Blessings on your preaching",

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