

Suffering and Glory
4th Sunday after Trinity
(From the Epistle: Romans viii. 18 ff.)

18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. 20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, 21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. 23 And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

When I reviewed today's Epistle in preparation for the sermon, I began to think of this matter of *suffering*, and especially what it means to us as citizens of America in the 21st century. St. Paul, as do all the apostolic writers, places a high premium on this theme of suffering. Think for example of Peter's words:

-Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. (1 Pe. 5:8-10)

The New Testament letters clearly indicate that the 1st century Church suffered for its faith. Paul wrote to the Philippian believers, who were under persecution:

...in nothing [be] terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God. For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me. (1:28-30)

We, as modern believers, when reviewing these classical accounts of suffering for the faith, along with all others like them since the first century, may be inclined to wonder in what matter we also might be privileged to be called to suffer: *For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake...* This question has made me want to review our circumstances, because when the *glorious liberty* referred to in today's Epistle finally comes to pass, we would not want to be anything but full sharers in it.

In what manner, then, do we suffer, here, today, and now, for Christ's sake? Let me suggest some very real and concrete ways. Even if we are not openly, actively persecuted as Christians, we certainly, in my view, are subject to a steady stream of passive forms of it, which, in their fashion, are just as manifest. To slowly, deliberately, and maliciously wear away at something until you have beaten it down or incapacitated it is surely just as effective at destroying it as smashing it to bits.

The first way is isolation from the culture. This manifests itself in a host of ways. When one cannot in good conscience affirm the other things that most people believe in nor approve the things they do, it not only sets us apart negatively in their eyes, but is for us itself a source of heartache. Americans have traditionally in their way been a sort of family. We have shared common values, traditions, and beliefs that have always been constantly held before our eyes through our national symbols: the flag, the Statue of Liberty, our Capitol with its array of monuments, our founding documents, and numerous war memorials, to name a few. The principles associated with these icons have drawn a very diverse group of people together in a sense of mutual identification. So strong and so universal were these influences that they could be counted upon, depended upon, almost without thought. To conceive of their loss or compromise would have been like imagining that the national flag could somehow unravel itself, strand by strand.

But when a nation --and not only its leaders, but most of its people-- turn away so clearly and deliberately from its founding beliefs and the virtues associated with them to embrace a new set of values and the behavior arising from those, while still paying great lip service to noble themes now degraded to mere self-justifying mantras, the result for those who refuse to follow along is *suffering*. It is a suffering based upon disappointment over something very beautiful and good that is being ruined. With this is a sense of powerlessness in the face of change, because what can one do to stop such a universal rush to the abandonment of the good? It is a very real suffering based upon inevitable membership in an unpopular minority of resistance, because by our very refusal to participate, we are passing judgment on the decisions that others are so freely making. Our sadness includes that bleak sense of having lost relationships that we cannot recover, those of our neighbors, communities, and countrymen whose willful breaking of those invisible bonds of common ideals that once united us might as well have placed them away from us in another country, an almost unrecognizable one, altogether. Added to these afflictions is the urgent necessity of developing a workable defense, a practical means of articulating our position, of revisiting those themes which once were a national heritage that we still love and stubbornly adhere to, both for our own comfort and to refute those who have made themselves opponents.

This is no small burden of suffering placed upon us, and it is one of very significant merit. Not only is it our place *to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* (Jude 1:3), which has always been the mission of the church, but also to be faithful guardians of the great good that has been the legacy entrusted to us by our national forbears: America in all its high idealism, generosity, and love of the right. Our suffering in this latter capacity is due largely to its being, in many respects, a losing battle. If the people do not wish to retain that which they've so willingly given up, what can we or anyone else do for them?

We also suffer for the Church, Christ's Body. I am reminded here of Paul's profound words: *I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church* (Col. 1:24). Once again, although we have not shared within our own experience the forms of Paul's physical persecution, it is our privilege to join him in his tribulations on behalf of the church. This is largely a voluntary assignment, one that the believer signs up for, and takes upon himself. Many refuse it, simply by disassociating themselves from the church altogether. They do so either from understandable frustration with the current state of the church, or through following the spirit of the age which scorns the importance of the church and its critical role as spiritual leavening agent and restrainer of evil. For these reasons, the church has few advocates and friends, who are willing to weather with her the storm of unbelief that mercilessly wears away at her. The divisions she has suffered, and the many battles she has endured, have so changed her appearance that it seems almost impossible to locate her, at all. Those who are her allies under such circumstances are indeed loyal to her. They know her God given mission and calling.

Those who suffer with the church are sensitive to its plight in our times. The church has always been beleaguered, but its struggles today are perhaps unique to its history. It has largely been reduced to being a mere player on a field occupied by many contenders given equal or even superior status. It has lost the deference once accorded it. Whether it has merited this change in attitude, or is the undeserving victim of it, or both, is another matter. The *church of the living God* is still, in the words of Paul, *the pillar and ground of the truth*. This is what she is, in spite of what she may have become! Our willingness to stay by her side, to identify with her at all costs, to take upon ourselves the ministry of her reform and renewal, are all a part of our mission of *suffering*.

Today's Epistle implies that the release of all Creation from the bondage divinely imposed upon it, along with that of believers *which have the firstfruits of the Spirit*, will be into a *glorious liberty* that is in direct proportion to the degree of that suffering. Creation *waiteth patiently for the manifestation of the sons of God*. It is an *earnest expectation*, one that is breathlessly awaiting the arrival of the end of the story. The whole universe waits not with pleasant, light, carefree feelings, but *it groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now*. These are very strong terms. They imply great difficulty.

In the two verses that just precede today's Epistle, Paul had written:

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together [with Him]. (Romans 8:16, 17)

We may feel that our circumstances contain little of this sort of experience. Or we may wonder how our lives lived here can possibly result in a *glory* that should certainly be accorded actively

persecuted Christians whether in Paul's day, or elsewhere in our own world in many places. But it only takes a small step back from our own lives to see that we are indeed privileged to live in very challenging times in which a very particular form of suffering is granted to us.

Whether such suffering translates to glory is due, at least in part, with how we live our lives. The relationship between *the sufferings of this present time* and *the glory which shall be revealed in us* is not automatic.

Christ suffers when a nation "conceived in liberty" slides into apostasy and sin. He suffers when His Church forsakes Him to any degree.

Let us participate with Him as He suffers, that we might also participate in His glory.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.