

## Proper 24, Trinity 19

**Isaiah 53:4-12**

**Hebrews 5:1-12**

**Mark 10:35-45**

We lived 16 years in Dublin, and one of the great Dublin institutions is that twice a year, in Passiontide and at Christmas, all Dublin seems to be performing or listening to Handel's *Messiah*. You can, I can tell you, get sick of it. The reason is that the oratorio was first performed there in 1742 when Dublin was indubitably the second city of the British Empire. One of its most famous and moving arias, and one that sticks in the memory, is *He was despised and rejected, acquainted with grief*, and it concerns the theme of today's Isaiah where the servant bears our sufferings, tormented, tortured for our sakes.

And this theme of suffering servant is one that comes out again in Marks' gospel. Jesus gets rather cross with James and John. They really think that Jesus is going to reign in honour and splendour and they ask to be sat next to him. But he tells them quite sharply that while such ambitions might be appropriate to this world, if they really insist on sitting alongside him, they will suffer and die.

And then he introduces the word diakonos – service.

### First I want to look at the word service

- This is not slavery, despite what many will say, but service. Diakonh could be used of one who furnishes, supplies, conveys messages.
- Servants are, in their own way, very influential. Those who serve us in shops are quite often the people we talk to. They hear a lot, and can make soothing noises, they can give gentle advice, and their comments can influence us greatly.
- How many of you have heard of Jeeves and Wooster? Bertie Wooster might well have been the employer, but there is no doubting who had the influence.
- Servants do not seek power and rank, but they are very influential. So that is one point I want you to take home.

### Now what about suffering?

- There are Christians who suffer for their faith in spectacular fashion. Christians in Sudan. Christians in countries governed corruptly where they can see that government policy is unjust – Zimbabwe for example, at the moment.
- In my last job I sometimes found myself in the role of loyal dissenter. This kind of suffering servanthood at work is common to many of us – we see something that is wrong, and we must risk an adverse reaction if we point it out. To criticise or question the Pharisees is a lonely job.
- All this is prophecy. We need prophets. We need look no further back than the twentieth century to see what happens when prophets are silenced. Germany. Now WMD, Kelly. The Head of the Army today condemned for his prophecy about a war that is to my mind impossible to justify.
- Jesus was both spiritual and revolutionary – two sides of the same coin and such people ask real, often painful and upsetting questions to show what the true situation really is. This certainly involves suffering – it is never easy to go against the grain.

**I give these examples to show that Christian discipleship may bring suffering, mocking, even death, when we stand by our Christian principles rather than deny them, as Peter did. But I want to go deeper still.**

Jesus has given us guidelines about what we need to do to follow him, and we've heard some of them in the readings over the last few weeks.

- Open like children
- Family
- Rich man
- All signals that we need to take responsibility for ourselves and not be dependent on others, on old obsessions, or use people or relationships as crutches, as ties that bind and tether us to the past.

As you get to know me better you'll realise that I have only one message really, and it's that we all have Christ within – the divine core. That's the point of the Incarnation and Pentecost, to divinize human life. It's a frequent theme in Holy Scripture that we begin to get glimpses of God when we truly know ourselves. And this is the theme of much psychology too: know yourself, and you begin to get glimpses of the divine within.

This kind of discovery comes only through self-examination. And for me this involves distressing internal turmoil. Getting to know myself involves soul-searching, the discarding of images from the past, discarding the expectations of others and the exposure of childhood hurts to the cold light of day so that they can then wither away. And however far down I go, it always seems that I have never reached the bottom of the barrel. There is always more.

I need to be become spiritually naked, to see right down into the core.

Susan Howatch

It is very difficult work. This really is suffering, but the insights it yields can be truly cathartic. It's like climbing a hill in thick fog and on stony rocks. But suddenly the clouds clear and the view is stunning. It is worth it.

Harry Williams

**So here is another image of suffering that we all endure.**

Not just suffering at the hands of others, but also suffering at our own hands. And is not this exactly similar to Jesus' suffering: he was despised, rejected and reviled by others, but he also voluntarily and willingly went into this suffering and, in a sense, brought it upon himself. **It is this second kind of suffering that I think is more difficult to work through. And we cannot avoid it.**

The Hebrews lesson tells us that the suffering Christ becomes the great High Priest, and through this kind of work, we are become priests – we all have the divine spark within us, and we all can be channels and representatives of God and Jesus. My job as a Clerk in Holy orders is to enable you all to see that, and to empower you to act on it.

**And if you doubt what it's for – and I do – you might recall Churchill's words during the second world war: suffering blood sweat tears, but then glory.**

**Summing up today's ramble**

- So I think the gospel message today is that to seek rank and position like James and John is not the Christian way.
- Rather, we must serve as we think is right, aware that it may well bring suffering
- We will get glimpses of God through seek spiritual nakedness before God,
- This certainly will bring suffering.
- But at least then we will be able to live with ourselves, and we will begin to get glimpses of Christ-likeness.

**Mother Theresa gave us some pointers which may help**

- People are often unreasonable, illogical or self-centred. Forgive them anyway.
- If you are successful, you will be sure to make some false friends and some true enemies. Be successful anyway.
- If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. Be honest and frank anyway.
- What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. Build anyway.
- If you find serenity and happiness others may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
- The good you do today people will often forget tomorrow. Be good anyway.
- Give the world the best you have and it may never be good enough. Give the world the best you've got anyway.
- You see, in the final analysis it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.