

## **Third Sunday of Easter (2019)**

### **The Cost of Discipleship (Acts 5:40; Jn 21:17)**

At least there are two words we all know very well, corresponding to two realities we all know very well, and they figure in today's reading; Love and suffering. They seem necessarily to go together in every normal life. The Ancient Greeks thought of life as doing and suffering. Everybody will normally cultivate love and avoid suffering, and everybody knows what is involved in the procedure. Every parent knows what joy children bring to them, and every parent knows what agony children cause them. The language of the family has been chosen to describe Christian discipleship. There is a common Father in heaven, and his children are on earth. They live in communities where relationships are expected to be familial. We address each other as sisters and brothers summoned together by a common Father. We do an extraordinary thing, never regularly done elsewhere: we confess our sins to that Father and to each other, and we ask forgiveness from him and from each other. Then we proceed to commemorate suffering and sacrifice and love, intimately associated with each other. It is as though everything our lives are about is crowded into the Sunday Mass. When we are suffering we are probably concentrated more than ever on our prayer, and much more attentive to the readings and prayers of the faithful. Suffering tends to concentrate the mind wonderfully.

#### **St. Peter**

In today's Gospel episode Peter's sincerity is put to the test: since he had denied Jesus three times he had to affirm his love for Jesus three times. And each time he receives a new responsibility. His role is very specific; and in so far as traits of character are attested in the text he seems to be a leader, albeit an impulsive one. The values he has to defend are of unsurpassed importance. He becomes the visible leader of this mixed and volatile group after the leadership of Jesus is no longer visible in any normal sense. "There is a plurality of images associated with Peter in the NT: missionary fisherman, pastoral shepherd, martyr, recipient of special revelation, confessor of the true faith, magisterial protector, and repentant sinner." (*Peter in the New Testament*, eds. R.E.Brown, K.E.Donfried, J.Reumann, Paulist Press, 1973, p.166). In John's Gospel Peter and the Beloved Disciple are both witnesses to Christ in quite different ways. Peter would die as a martyr professing his willingness to accept that role. The Beloved Disciple would live on. He was the perfect model of discipleship for the community that gave us John's gospel; they do not deny the real authority of Peter, but clearly find the Beloved Disciple their exemplar in believing. He never denied Jesus, was chosen as son for the mother of Jesus, and was intimate with Jesus in a way that Peter was not. Love figures powerfully in the description of both disciples. Perseverance was foundational in it. Today's reading from Acts 5:29 shows Peter exercising his leadership courageously in the face of shocking opposition. St. Luke says: the apostles were glad to suffer humiliation for the sake of the name (5:41). Their faithful love prevailed.

#### **Love and Suffering**

People need a great deal of conviction to hold steady under fire. But they also need the support of those who subscribe to the same principles and are willing to stand by them in time of trouble. Not all popes were saints by any means. Not all were capable of the great responsibilities they were elected to honour and defend. But a lot of them were. The best among Peter's successors have known very personally what discipleship costs. And, if history is any guide, after every suffering the Church with the papacy seemed to get stronger. The more it lost in material terms the more it gained in spiritual terms, and in moral influence. Catholics believe Peter's successors inherit Peter's commitments and so should not be surprised that these successors may also receive the sort of treatment that Peter received. But then is it not such for everyone who stands up for principle? We can see what parents and teachers and doctors have to undergo these days to maintain basic moral values. Hence the great importance of solidarity experienced in the Church. People should never feel that they are on their own when standing up for what is right. Just as they should never expect to be supported when they subvert the values they are committed to uphold. Christian communities are always being asked for prayers for those in need, not just the poor and sick and lonely, but those who are being targeted for maintaining values that make this life bearable for everyone. We have a notice board here in the convent ante-chapel and a box at the back of the chapel, where requests for prayers are requested and posted. It means that the Sisters at prayer have always others in mind, in all their needs so many and so varied. And many of us celebrating Mass here this morning know well that we with this praying community witness the continuous dedication to those in the nursing home and in the guesthouse. This is a most treasured universal Christian tradition, as we know from experience of parishes and monasteries and religious and lay movements the world over. We do not come to pray for contestation but for encouragement and consolation and mutual support, and peace.

### **Conclusion**

We began our meditation by looking at the suffering and love attested in The Acts of the Apostles and in John's gospel. These readings are all specially chosen for the Easter period. Easter is the triumph of life over death, love over hate, and the celebration of suffering that saves. This is the spring time of the Church's Year, recognisable especially to us here in our splendid surroundings; we must be thankful for it and love it, and like the elders in the Apocalypse reading today (5:14) bow down and worship, saying 'Thanks be to God.' Amen.

Rev Richard J. Taylor  
Spiritual Advisor  
MaterCare International  
Boarbank Hall, Cumbria, UK

