

Suffering for the Sake of the Gospel

A few years back when I was at Glacier National Park for the first time, I was on a guided tour of an area I hope to return to later this month when I'm out there again called the trail of the cedars. They were these huge growth trees and it resembles something out of Lord of the Rings as does much of the park. But the ranger made an interesting point. She said "do you see these trees? This is a sick forest. It needs a fire to become healthy again." They weren't at the point of doing any controlled burns in that part of the park, but as she pointed to some of the trees I saw her point. It was only after something changed that true growth and health of that forest could be realized.

A man who undergoes a lot of changes is Saint Paul. Remember this is the guy formerly known as Saul who persecutes Christians, and then Jesus meets him and asks him why he is persecuting Him. He then is told to wait a bit before beginning his work, and then he has to sort out how to deal with these different churches he's founded. But he also has a baptism by fire of sorts in how he suffers for the sake of the Gospel. As he says "I bear the marks of Jesus on my body" in our second reading from this week. But he is willing to, as we hear in the Gospel, be a lamb among wolves as he goes and evangelizes the world.

The readings this week are a reminder and a challenge, that change the suffering that comes with it are necessary for true spiritual growth.

It starts with ourselves. How are we changing as people? Spiritual growth isn't easy. But while we should rejoice in our success, as we celebrated the birth of John the Baptist two weeks back and called to mind his words "he must increase, I must decrease," the symbolism of his birthday at the summer solstice was there is only so much we can do before the darkness creeps back in, as it is doing now as the days grow slowly shorter. So where in our souls does the fire of the Holy Spirit need to do some burning? Where are we struggling or lacking? What have we fallen into in terms of sin old and new? By confronting these things and owning up to them and asking for God's help we can have true growth.

But then there's that part of being a lamb among wolves as Jesus speaks of in our Gospel this week. As I've mentioned it's difficult being a prophet. Any parent knows the little bundle of joy who loves you unconditionally isn't going to sail smoothly into adulthood, because none of us do. But a parent realizes they have to be a parent not just a friend. So we have to ask ourselves, are we willing to bear the marks of Jesus on our souls, namely suffer for the sake of the Gospel? Evangelizing the world is tough business, but when we are vigilant about helping others to grow in the faith by explaining it to them, we do so much to help people on their journey.

And lastly through it all, patience. Jesus in the Gospel this week speaks of shaking the dust from our feet if a town doesn't receive us, but I think sometimes we can be too quick to jump to that option. We give up on people. We think we can't change someone or the world can't be fixed. But remember, Jesus could have walked away from the

crucifixion. He could have called down angels and sought revenge and shown the world who He was that way. But instead, there was patience. Patience in trusting the Father's plan. Patience in knowing that while the Church was incredibly small and these followers of His seemingly rather fickle, things would work out. Being an evangelist is tough work - but God journeys with us and given time, we will be truly amazed at what happens when we don't give up.

Jesus gives us our marching orders this week. And as the 72 disciples were sent out in pairs in the Gospel, we are sent out never alone, but with God and so many great people to help us on our journey. Let's make sure the faith isn't kept behind the doors of our churches, but is boldly proclaimed in our homes and in our world, as together we bring people to God through words and actions and set the world on fire with the flames of the Holy Spirit.

Have a very blessed week,

Fr. Paul