

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B 2006 Is 53:10-11; Mk 10:42-45

1. A while back, a friend of mine came from Germany for a visit.
 - a. One night we were watching television, where every fourth commercial was an advertisement for weight-loss products, aspirin, antacids, laxatives, antidepressants and sleep aids.
 - b. And he said, “You Americans worry so much about people who use illegal drugs; have you ever noticed how many of you abuse the legal ones?”
2. I laughed and said, “what are you saying: that we Americans are one big group of overweight, sleep - deprived, insomniacs with nasty headaches?”
3. He did not laugh (Germans don’t, as a rule laugh) and replied, “No. But you Americans do not like to suffer”.
4. I replied that I thought that that went without saying, no matter who we are; Americans, Germans, whatever.
5. To which he replied, “But then, how do you grow?”
 - a. I think my German friend has a point.
 - i. To watch TV or to read a magazine is to be inundated with advertisements offering products that will take away our fat, our wrinkles, our headaches our depression, our anxiety, our insomnia, our “acid reflux”
 - ii. We have literally become a nation which thinks that the way to a stress free, healthy life is just a pill, or two or three away.
6. Now I am not suggesting (as Tom Cruise once did) that such medications are bad.
 - a. But I cannot help but wonder :
 - i. how we got to this point?
 - ii. How did we become a nation filled with people
(1) for whom life is only tolerable when medicated?
 - iii. How? Because we are afraid to suffer; so afraid that we will do anything even drug ourselves, to avoid it.
 - iv. And thus, at least for awhile, to convince ourselves that we are free of it.
7. The author of the first reading from Isaiah was writing to a people
 - a. who did not need to convince themselves that they were free from suffering;
 - i. for really they finally were.
 - b. This part of the book of the prophet Isaiah was written at a time
 - c. when an almost inconceivable thing had happened.
 - i. After the destruction of their country
 - ii. and after a generation of forced exile in Babylon,
 - d. The new king of Babylon, Emperor Cyrus of Persia had issued a decree allowing the people of Judah to return to their promised land.
8. However, even as they returned home, a question still plagued them: Why?

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- a. Why had their land been destroyed;
 - b. Why had they been forced into exile;
 - c. Why did they have to suffer?
9. It was to answer that question that the writer included throughout the latter part of the book of Isaiah, a song about someone called, "The Suffering Servant."
- a. Christians centuries later would see in this song
 - i. a prediction of Jesus and his passion, his suffering.
 - b. But the first hearers of this song would have heard it
 - i. not as a prediction about Jesus and his passion,
 - ii. but as a proclamation to the people of Judah about their own.
10. The people of Judah were that servant of God,
- a. who had to bear the results of the mistakes that their forefathers made;
 - i. Which meant that they were crushed, they were afflicted; they suffered.
11. But while we might have seen this as punishment, strangely enough,
- a. The author of the Servant Song did not;
 - i. He saw their suffering not so much as a passion but a preparation;
 - (1) God, making the people of Judah stronger and holier for their new life in the promised land.
 - ii. In short, God used their suffering to make them grow.
12. Little wonder the Church to this day reads about the suffering servant on Good Friday;
- a. For they would see in Judah's suffering a prediction of Jesus' passion
 - b. And in Judah's revival the promise of his resurrection.
13. This idea that even suffering can have a purpose
- a. did not sit any better with Jesus' disciples than it does with us.
 - b. For if we could read the context of the scene we hear in today's Gospel
 - c. we would see that it comes just after Jesus predicts *HIS* passion
 - i. that he will suffer, die and rise.
 - ii. NOW this is the second time he has said this;
 - (1) and what are the disciples doing?
 - (a) They are arguing about who will be the greatest,
 - (b) the richest,
 - (c) the most powerful in Jesus' kingdom.
 - iii. Now many might argue that this is just another proof that the disciples were ignorant;
 - iv. But the disciples weren't ignorant; they were afraid;
 - (1) they had just been told that the one they had put their hope in for greatness, riches and power was going to suffer and die,

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- (a) and thus, in all probability, so would they.
 - (2) therefore they would do anything in their power, even lie to themselves and fantasize about the glories that would soon be theirs, in order to avoid it.
- 14. But Jesus would not let them be afraid of suffering;
 - a. Nor would he let them avoid it.
 - i. It was why he had just reminded them that their part in his kingdom was to experience his passion;
 - ii. It was also why he taught them,
 - (1) and the Gospel of Mark has taught all of us ever since,
 - (2) that if we wanted to be great in his kingdom
 - (a) we must have compassion,
 - (i) which is literally to suffer with someone.
- 15. Because according to Jesus when we suffer we are not far from him,
 - a. when we suffer we are closest to him, at his side as it were, on his right and his left,
 - b. whether through our own suffering,
 - i. or suffering with someone else in theirs.
 - ii. In fact it is precisely at those moments of suffering with someone, that we become Jesus' presence for those who suffer.
 - (1) And in our suffering others become that presence for us.
- 16. Nevertheless, I think my German friend was right.
 - a. We Americans have a pathological fear of suffering; so much so that we will do anything, even drug ourselves, to avoid it.
 - i. And yet when I think back over the times in my life when I have suffered.
 - ii. Times which, if you have been listening to my homilies over the past three and a half years you will be familiar with
 - (1) When my parents died, for example,
 - (2) Or when I was asked to leave the seminary.
 - iii. I have to admit that, while there were moments where I would have done anything to escape the suffering I felt,
 - iv. As I look back over those times, I realize that
 - (1) I would not be the priest I am,
 - (2) the Catholic I am
 - (3) the man I am were it not for what I suffered.
 - v. For it was precisely that suffering that did for me
 - (1) what it does for all of us,

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- (2) If we open our hearts and our minds to it
- (3) and see that we were not alone in our suffering ;
- vi. It made me grow
 - (1) as it does for us all.