

“The Paradox of Suffering and Glory”

5th Sunday of Easter (Cycle C)

Acts 14:21-27; Ps 145:8-13; Rev 21:1-5a; Jn 13:31-35

Exactly 20 years ago this month

- I began a one-year stint with a Marine Infantry Battalion
 - serving as a Forward Air Controller

I recall being very impressed with the Battalion Commander, a LtCol

- a consummate professional, devout Catholic, and a “Marine’s Marine”

And this commander – even relative to other infantry commanders

- loved to take his battalion out on hikes
 - 12, 15, 18, 20 mile hikes in full combat gear.
- And, particularly in the summertime heat & humidity of Camp Lejeune, NC
 - some of those hikes could be rather challenging
 - Not uncommon for some of the weaker ones in the battalion
 - to start falling out of formation.
 - NCO’s were quick to bark their tough-love encouragement
 - to “get back in line”
 - but reality was that a number of the Marines
 - just weren’t strong enough to make it
 - and corpsmen were soon on hand to treat them
 - for heat exhaustion.
- On these hikes, I noticed a rather interesting phenomenon:
 - In the last few miles as we recognized the end of the hike was near
 - there was a surge of energy in the ranks,
 - a burst of renewed strength.
 - particularly when we got the barracks in sight way down the road
 - when you could “see the barn” as some would say,
 - you could literally feel the rising spirits of the Marines
 - the columns tightened up and
 - very few fell out of formation.

- Our Battalion Commander recognized this reality and would occasionally
 - hike on back to the barracks just as planned,
 - but then... he didn't stop...
 - Without breaking stride, he marched right past the barracks
 - and continued on down the road...
 - much to the dismay of his Marines!
- As realization quickly spread thru the ranks that the hike wasn't over
 - and worse, nobody was certain when it *would* be over
 - the negative effects were almost immediate:
 - Motivation plummeted, a few choice words were uttered, hope faded...
 - And, I kid you not, within abt 100 yards of passing the barracks,
 - you'd see some Marines start fading
 - 100 yards more -- and they were falling out
 - sometimes with rather dramatic flair,
 - staggering sideways before
 - collapsing into the ditch on the roadside...
 - corpsmen summoned to treat them.
- Then, just a block or so past the barracks, the Battalion Commander
 - would make a sudden U-turn
 - and march the battalion right past those who had just fallen out
 - and to the barracks where the hike now ended...
- He then heartily congratulated all the Marines who gutted it out
 - and admonished those who fell,
 - particularly the ones who quit at the very end,
 - *"You stayed with me for 18 long miles, yet as soon as you lost hope you couldn't go even ¼ mile more..."*

As this Battalion Commander would occasionally explain to his officers:

- as much as these hikes were about developing physical toughness
- he was at least as concerned about building mental toughness.

Well that wise LtCol is now a 4-star General:

- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Joseph F. Dunford, Jr.
- and what a pleasure it is to see a man of his caliber rise to the very top!

Today there are 3 spiritual parallels we can draw from this story
in the light of our Scripture readings:

1. Importance of hope – for it sustains us when we’re weary
2. Importance of “intestinal fortitude” – the *will* or *determination* to hang in there if we ever lose that hope
3. Good can come from suffering – though it’s not always obvious in the midst of suffering.

Like it or not, being born into this world is to be born onto a battlefield.

- a spiritual battlefield
 - where more than mere lives are on the line
 - but the eternal destiny of our souls...
 - and is there anything more important?

There are no shortages of *examples* of spiritual battles in the world

- and they come in many forms:

Christian persecution continues in the Middle East, most recently:

- the murder of 4 Missionaries of Charity sisters in Yemen

Closer to home:

- The state of Utah this past week officially declared Pornography
 - to be a public health crisis – actually referring to it as a plague
- Living together before marriage
 - has now become an almost universal expectation

And just one more that could take the “Can’t Make this Stuff Up” award:

- Our latest cultural obsession seems to be to let people

- use whichever public restroom they want – Male/Female: your choice..!
- It's so outrageous that it almost sounds like a "Sat Nite Live" skit
 - But if we're waiting for the punch line, it ain't coming(!)
 - This is our reality folks!

And we're called to raise our families amongst this stuff...

A big part of the problem in the U.S. today

- is that American culture worships at the altar
 - of Political Correctness
 - where it's a mortal sin to even *accidentally* hurt someone's feelings
 - much less express a difference of opinion.
 - And if you should dare have a different opinion
 - you're certainly a bigot, and are likely suffering from one or more phobias
 - Political Correctness that can shift as quickly as the wind,
 - totally based on our whims and personal agendas,
 - sensitivities and the loudest voices
- I'm happy to stand up here today and remind us:
 - Praise God, we don't worship at that church!
- We worship at the altar of Jesus Christ
 - who, as I recall, wasn't exactly known for being "PC"
 - He was as loving & merciful as the world has *ever* known
 - but he also *unflinchingly* spoke the Truth.
- We worship a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever
- God of true Love: self-sacrificing Love as Jesus commands in today's Gospel
 - God of Mercy, Hope, Freedom,
 - and Wisdom (which seems to be on such short supply)

So the **Theme of the day** is one of both struggle & hope.

We see this in our first reading in the Acts of the Apostles

Paul & Barnabas are wrapping up their first big missionary journey

- having travelled from Antioch to the island of Cyprus
 - then onward, deep into modern-day Turkey
 - and back again to Antioch
 - 1,000+ mile journey
- This first journey had great successes: many converts to Christianity
 - But it was definitely not without its trials along the way...
 - Appears to have been some internal conflict (very few details) – John Mark left the mission early and went back to Jerusalem.
 - Later, after they healed a man crippled from birth
 - the locals concluded Paul & Barnabas must be
 - the Greek gods of Zeus & Hermes!
 - the people wanted to offer sacrifices to them...
 - (talk about a homily & healing service taking a wrong turn!)
 - On another occasion, the townspeople stoned Paul,
 - dragged him out of town, and left him for dead.
 - Yet thru it all, they did not lose hope
 - Paul's resolve and faith were evident as he sought to encourage the new disciples of Christ, saying:
 - it is "*thru many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22)

Our 2nd reading from the book of Revelation talks about that "Kingdom of God" and is a great source of Hope for us on the spiritual battlefield:

- describing the future we have to look forward to with:
 - the creation of a New Heaven & a New Earth
 - "*Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race..*"
 - He will wipe away every tear
 - there will be no more death, sorrow, pain

Then in today's Gospel, what some call the "Paradox of Suffering & Glory" John tells us,

- When Judas left the Last Supper to go betray Jesus:
 - *Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.”* (Jn 13:31)
- This can be a tough concept to wrap our brains around:
- Jesus saw his glory, and the glory of God the Father, thru the path of
 - betrayal by a friend
 - humiliation by his people
 - condemnation by his leaders
 - Crucifixion by the Romans (John, A Devotional Commentary, p. 148-149)
- This all sounds quite disgraceful; so where is the glory in all this suffering?
- The answer is that Jesus was glorified because
 - despite being whipped, beaten, spat upon, mocked & crucified
 - he persevered in following the will of the Father
 - thru thick & thin...
- *“not my will, but thine be done”* as he prayed in the Garden. (Lk 22:42)
 - Jesus recognized in his loyalty & obedience to God the Father,
 - accomplishing the grueling mission that had been given him,
 - literally & figuratively carrying His cross...
 - in this was honor & triumph – indeed Glory for God.

Our suffering today comes in many forms and for many reasons:

- Paternal correction by God as He
 - tries to nudge us back onto the right path
- Battles against our own concupiscence -- our natural tendency to sin,
 - which must be subdued by discipline
- We suffer in the ills of society as we discussed earlier.

But how do we respond to suffering and the trials of life?

- Naturally, we don't like to suffer, but it IS an integral part of our present lives
 - We don't suffer for the sake of suffering
 - and we do not “seek out” suffering in some masochistic fervor.
 - But when God allows suffering to enter our lives

- we must learn to not chafe at it, but take up our cross
- and try to follow the example of Christ who saw it as a path to Glory
 - staying true to God even if it entails suffering...

Thomas Haydock, a Catholic writer (early 1800's)

known for Bible commentary, had this to say about suffering:

- *“Wo then to you lovers of this world,*
- *who wish to pass your lives without tribulation,*
 - *enemies of the cross.*
- *...is the disciple above his master?*
- *[Was it not befitting for] Christ first to suffer,*
 - *and thus enter into his glory?*
- *And shall we pretend to enter by any other means?”* (Haydock Bible Commentary (iPieta), Acts 14:21)

It's easy to praise God when things are going our way:

- when employment's good – money in the bank, food on the table
- everyone's healthy & happy
- we have no problems praising Jesus when the sun's shining.

But when there's struggle, pain, uncertainty, hope is fading...

- it's suddenly not so easy is it?
- But just like staying strong on the hike even as the column
 - marches right past the barracks...
- our perseverance in such times is all the more commendable...

A wise priest named Fr. Gabriel, in his book of reflections “Divine Intimacy” wrote:

- *“The theological virtues [faith, hope, love] are practiced essentially*
 - *by the WILL.*
- *When they are accompanied by feeling, the practice of [these virtues] is pleasant and consoling;*

- *but when the act of [faith, hope or love] must be made by the will alone [w/o pleasant feelings] then this exercise is dry & cold,*
- *but... [our endurance in these times] is even **more meritorious***
 - *and therefore gives more glory to God.*
- *We must not, therefore, be disturbed if we do not FEEL confidence;*
 - *we must WILL to have confidence,*
 - *WILL to hope, to hope at any cost,*
 - *in spite of [our] trials.” (Fr. Gabriel, Divine Intimacy, 248.2)*

So we see we must make that conscious choice to keep following Christ when the going gets tough...

Question of the day:

- When chips are down, and the night is cold & dark
 - and your world seems to be crumbling all around you
 - all hope is lost...
 - What will you do?
 - Stagger sideways into the ditch and be another casualty?
 - Or will you follow the example of Jesus
 - who saw special glory for those who persevere
 - through dire times...
- Today we are asked: Does my life glorify God when my cross is heavy?

May we echo the words of the psalmist who wrote:

“Why are you cast down my soul? Why do you groan within me? Hope in God, I will praise Him still...” (Ps 43:5)