

In today's second reading we heard one of the most debated phrases in all of St. Paul's letters. "Therefore, that I might not become too elated, *a thorn in the flesh* was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me" (II Cor. 12: 7). Some commentators suggest that the apostle was dealing with a disease or a handicap which was especially trying or humiliating. Others think Paul is alluding to the constant persecutions that follow him wherever he goes, as if Satan were dogging his very steps in an effort to discourage him. Some have even supposed that assaulted by numerous and unceasing troubles, Paul was like a man flayed alive, owing to his extreme sensibility.

Paul goes on to say, "Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me" (II Cor. 12:8). In this prayer Paul reminds us of Jesus and his petition during his agony on the night before he died in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he, too, begged the Father three times to be spared the ordeal that lay before him. "Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will" (Mk. 14:36). Just as in the case of Jesus, God did not reject Paul's prayer, but neither did he lift the burden of the cross Paul was carrying. God did, however, assure Paul that in his suffering he was not abandoned, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made strong through weakness*" (II Cor. 12:9). Paul's prayer, as well as the God's answer, are to be seen in the perspective the mystery of the cross of Christ, who has revealed God's power. Paul is reminding us that life in Christ is immersion in the totality of that mystery: cross, death and resurrection. That, after all is what the sacrament of baptism and its renewal in every Eucharist is all about. Paul reminds us that the life of faith plunges us into the mystery of suffering, but not suffering for its own sake, as he notes in another place: "For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (II Cor. 4:11).

While we need to work to alleviate or eliminate unnecessary pain and suffering caused by disease, natural disaster or human acts of injustice, and in our personal life sin, we can expect that a certain amount of suffering will be part of our human journey.

In my ministry as a priest I often hear people express their frustration (and in some cases their despondency) in dealing with a psychological or spiritual struggle, or a pattern of personal sin that, despite their best efforts, never seems to dissipate, but (in some instances) seems only to worsen which is causing them suffering. Like the apostle they, too, pray that this “thorn” be taken from them. And just as for Paul in his suffering, as their priest, I do not have a “silver bullet” or a “miracle cure” to give them. But, as I have ministered to these individuals and reflected on this mystery in their lives as well as in my own, I’ve come to an important insight.

While certainly not causing pain and suffering, in the mystery known only to God, God permits suffering in our lives. Not unmindful of our suffering, and for reasons unknown to us in this life not choosing to remove it from us, yet God is not indifferent to our plight. In our suffering as St. Paul eventually comes to discover, God’s “*grace*” is sufficient if we but open our minds and ears and our sufferings accompanied by God’s grace can be a means of drawing us into deeper faith. In our moments of need or trial God’s grace is available to us in several ways, surely through prayer, but also in the love, concern, support, and companionship of others who stand or walk in solidarity with us a “Simon of Cyrene” who like for Jesus in his hour of suffering, companions us on our journey and helps us shoulder our cross if we but open our eyes, ears and hearts to grace “made flesh” before us.

The prophet Ezekiel and Jesus both confront a spirit of closed-mindedness and hard heartedness in their efforts to offer God’s grace to the people of their day. So distressing was Jesus’ experience that the story closes with this sad commentary: “he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people... . He was amazed by their lack of faith” (Mk 6:5,6).

Hopefully, the same is not or will not be said of us. Like Paul, we are invited to open our lives to God’s grace. And if we do, that will be enough for us.