

Suffering's Part of the Deal

Americans are optimistic people. It is our strong suit. All we need is a little running room and we will make it into the end zone. Just make the game fair; and the best competitor will win. Americans historically have loved the Good News of Jesus because everything he did and said was indeed Good News. Jesus was the most optimistic person who ever lived. He saw beyond setbacks, disappointments, betrayals, assaults and even killings, embracing the larger hope and certainty that his righteous kingdom triumphs in the end. However, a lot of Americans have trouble understanding how suffering has anything to do with Good News - even though Jesus warned us many times that we will suffer if we choose to follow him. Often, when trials or suffering come our way, we think that something has gone wrong or gotten off-track; perhaps God has fallen asleep at the wheel. After all, how could bad things happen to really good people such as ourselves?

As you wear green today and prepare to hit the streets with your joy, consider the life of Saint Patrick. A lot of people think Patrick had it easy, that everything always went his way. Think again. He was kidnapped in England, dragged to Ireland and made a slave. He was forced into hard labor and spat upon by his Druid captors. Yet, Patrick dug deep and drew close to God in all his sufferings. In fact, he eventually escaped captivity and made it back to England as a free man. You would think at that point he would have amassed an army and headed back to Ireland to obliterate the Irish who had made his life so miserable. Instead, he pulled together an army of monks armed with the love of Christ in their hearts and ready for spiritual warfare. He forgave his captors, defeated their spirits with the power of the Holy Spirit, and made Ireland alive with the love of God; so much so, that March 17th has become a sacred and holy day, a cause of great celebration each year around the world. St. Patrick's Day should remind us that the love of God triumphs over evil and darkness every time.



Saint Patrick

But, if Patrick had not embraced his suffering as an integral element of his Christian faith, there would be no St. Patrick's Day - rivers becoming green, families and friends hugging and celebrating on the brink of spring. The same is true for Jesus himself. If he had not remained obedient to the Father, fully accepting his mission to die on the cross for the sake of humanity, embracing suffering at a level unimaginable, there would be no forgiveness of sins, no Easter celebration; we

would not be preparing our hearts, homes, churches and dinner tables to rejoice remembering the greatest miracle the world has ever known.

When Christians were being thrown to the lions, sawed in two, and burned at the stake by the Roman authorities in the First Century, the Apostle Peter wrote these famous words to bolster the courage and resolve of the growing Christian community of that day; "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you." (1Peter 4:12-14)



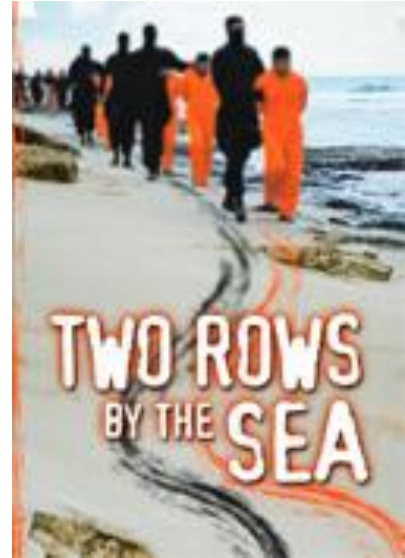
Pakistani Christian women mourn at a church damaged from a suicide bombing attack in Lahore, Pakistan, Sunday, March 15, 2015

Recently, suicide bombers from the Taliban entered two different churches in Lahore, Pakistan, and blew themselves up in order to kill the innocent people who had come to worship that morning. One victim was a 10-year-old boy who had gone to church to pray and prepare himself for an important school exam. The Taliban spokesman said there would be many more such bombings in the future, that Christians deserved to die for believing that Jesus was the Son of God.

Egypt is still stunned by the beheadings of the 21 innocent men of Christian Coptic, Orthodox faith seeking employment opportunities in Libya. But, the Christian leaders of Egypt refuse to cry for revenge, not wanting to return evil for evil. The mothers, fathers and wives of these victims, whole Christian neighborhoods, are going on national television asking the Egyptian people to pray, stay centered on Jesus, asking God to forgive and transform the terribly lost and violent ISIS followers, especially the executioners themselves. There is a national outpouring of forgiveness, sorrow, prayer, and a cry for Christian love in their land - that the lives of these 21 men never be forgotten as God's chosen martyrs - brought to glory in order for the seeds of the Church, the path of peace, to grow throughout Egypt and the entire Arab world. The Egyptian Bible Society wrote the following poem, which is now being circulated worldwide.

Two rows of men walked the shore of the sea,
On a day when the world's tears would run free,
One a row of assassins, who thought they did right,

The other of innocents, true sons of the light,
One holding knives in hands held high,
The other with hands empty, defenseless and tied,
One row of slits to conceal glaring-dead eyes,
The other with living eyes raised to the skies,
One row stood steady, pall-bearers of death,
The other knelt ready, welcoming heaven's breath,
One row spewed wretched, contemptible threats,
The other spread God-given peace and rest.



A Question...

Who fears the other?

The row in orange, watching paradise open?

Or the row in black, with minds evil and broken?

For many modern-day Americans, it has been tempting to think that the gruesome deaths of Christians in the First Century was a thing of the past - that something like that could never take place today; that such brazen, blatant murders were antithetical to our advanced civilization. But now we know better. The world, perhaps, is now a lot less innocent. We are being reminded that following Jesus has many demands on the soul, severe tests of our faith and resolve as a part of the joy and peace the Gospel brings to our lives. Suffering in recent years has suddenly become more real.

God uses our trials to shape our characters in order that we become more Christ-like, more restful, and less anxious. Slowly and beautifully we become instruments of God's peace for God's greater purposes in the world. But, if we try to wish away our trials or sufferings, convince ourselves that such pain has nothing to do with the teachings of Christ, we remain stuck in our Christian growth; we see and understand less of the kingdom of God, we distance ourselves even further from the powerful work of Jesus in the world today.

Suffering does not involve just physical trial. On the contrary, emotional suffering is often more difficult. It is arduous spiritual work to recover from a divorce, loss of a loved one, losing a job, or being told over and over again that you are no good. But, if we hold tightly to Jesus, trust in him with all our hearts, even when

surrounded by circumstances that make no sense to us and cause us great pain and suffering, we will walk with our Lord into new life on our own Easter morning.

My family and I wish you a most blessed Saint Patrick's Day, Holy Week, and Easter season.