Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 8, 2018

We come here on our Sabbath day to nurture our thirsty soul. Our presence here is an acknowledgment of our dynamic inner life, the action of God within our spirit. God is powerfully at work in the deepest part of our being. As we wrestle with God over some of the most baffling aspects of our life, we come to this question. Why me? When something very bad happens to us, this is our plaintive cry. It really isn't a question as much as our crying out in pain.

In the second reading today St. Paul talks about his thorn in the flesh. Again and again he asked God to deliver him from this burden, whatever it was. It must have been very painful, whatever it was. But apparently, St. Paul's prayer was never answered. Evidently St. Paul suffered greatly over some affliction. You would think that if anybody should be healed, it would be St. Paul. But no. St. Paul concludes that his weakness has made him strong. Therefore, he says, I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Easy to say. Words are cheap. When we are really hit hard with the hard knocks of life a spontaneous response would be, 'what did I do to deserve this?' One of the best helps when something terrible happens is to be with someone who has gone through the same thing. That is why we have the cross and the crucifixion. The son of God has gone through the same thing. Our Lord understands with all his heart and all his soul, with all the Almighty compassion of God.

Support groups are very effective. Here in the Wisconsin Rapids area we have a grief support group that meets once a month at St. Vincent parish. For others there is alcoholics anonymous. We have prayer groups, the prayer chain, Eucharistic ministers to the hospital in the homebound.

Whatever our thorn in the flesh may be, we know that with St. Paul, we are not alone. We all have a monkey on our back. It is part of our human condition. Some people's response to suffering in life is to anesthetize it, somehow try to numb the pain. Others simply try to ignore or deny it and 'get away from it all' in some form or another. None of this works very well.

Saint John Paul II wrote a beautiful Apostolic Letter on this subject entitled, 'On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering. When we bond together as brothers and sisters in joyful things, such as the 4th of July, it is wonderful, indeed. Family reunions, weddings, graduations, friends just getting together, and those who are in love simply being together are all examples of human bonding. But when we come together in sorrow it glues us together like nothing else. When tragedy happens to some of us, it galvanizes us as one. A good is example is the 911 terrorist attack.

So it is with the cross of Christ. God is joined together with us in this flesh and blood way. Nothing can compare to it. It doesn't take the suffering away but it does heal it. John Paul II calls it redemptive suffering. Even the angels of God can't come close to the intimacy that it brings.

In the classic book, When Bad things Happen to Good People, by Harold Kushner, he explains how he came to write the book. His three year old son was diagnosed with an incurable disease. The disease is call 'rapid aging'. It was a certainty that his son would not live beyond his teenage years. He died at age 14.

Let us go back to the second reading now and read it once again:

Brothers and sisters:
That I, Paul, might not become too elated,
because of the abundance of the revelations,
a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan,
to beat me, to keep me from being too elated.
Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me,
but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness."
I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses,
in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.
Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults,
hardships, persecutions, and constraints,
for the sake of Christ;
for when I am weak, then I am strong.