

**‘A lamp which guides our steps in the night’**

In these recent months we have been reflecting on divine providence and the mystery of suffering and evil. Today we conclude this with some considerations on how and when we can bring these reflections into our pastoral care of those who are experiencing pain and loss – as may sometimes happen in our apostolic activities as legionaries, and in our broader life as Catholics.

Experience shows that there are certain limits here. Theological reflections and arguments appeal to the intellect rather than the emotions, and in any case make no claim to actually remove the evils in question. Overall, they are more directed to countering, on an abstract level, the arguments of unbelievers, in their attempts (likewise on an abstract level) to prove that there cannot be a good God if all these evils exist.

In this, our counterarguments are logically correct, successfully showing that the atheist arguments fail: we perceive that God permits evils to occur, for the sake of an even greater good. Yet, the reality of us often being unable to say in detail in individual cases what that greater good is, leaves us still in the realm of mystery, without full intellectual resolution: we will not have final answers until heaven.

We can see from this the limitations of the abstract theology in a pastoral situation. Someone experiencing suffering is typically not looking for the theological theory; and many people, in any case, are not well-equipped for it. It may be helpful for some, especially if their suffering is causing them to struggle with questions of faith.

All this indicates that on the one hand it is good – for priests, teachers and others – to provide the theological reflections in advance, to all, as part of teaching and communicating our faith. In this way, our hearers already have them as one part of their mental and spiritual background and repertoire – when the existential challenges do arise, in the experience of actual deep suffering. In the midst of the suffering however, the theology should be employed with sensitivity, reserve and caution, as one possible aspect of our pastoral approach.

We are familiar with the *Book of Job* in the Old Testament – the most extended scriptural reflection on this whole question of why suffering and evil exist, and in particular, the great mystery, ‘Why do good people suffer?’ We recall its contents: Job experiences great suffering – his children are killed, he loses his property, (*Job* 1:13-22) and he is struck with a terrible disease. (2:7-8) His wife asks him, what good is it to have served God if this is what happens? ‘Curse God and die’, she says. (2:9) Job refuses to do that – he stays faithful. (2:10) And yet, he does wish he was never born and wants his life to end. (3)

The book consists mainly in extended conversations between Job and his friends. Job’s friends are supposedly comforting him, but are basically telling him, ‘If you’re suffering, it must be that you’re being punished for some great sins you’ve committed.’ That was a typical idea of the time: that suffering is always a punishment for one’s sins. But Job insists that he has not committed any great sins. Like anyone, he is not perfect, but surely, he says, he does not deserve what is happening to him. Finally at the end of the book, God himself speaks to Job. (38-42) Yes, Job’s friends are wrong (42:7-9) – yet Job himself was not totally right either. God does

not give him answers, but basically says, ‘How can human beings expect to understand the mysteries of God’s plans? How can we challenge God’s wisdom with our tiny knowledge?’

A central part of the meaning of *Job* is that in this question of suffering, usually there are no easy answers. These days we hopefully know well enough not to say to someone who is suffering that it must be a punishment for their sins. But even beyond that, there are so many things that only God knows, and that we will only understand in eternity. Here below, we have to learn to live with mystery.

When someone we know is suffering, often we do want to give them answers. And hopefully we can sometimes say something that gives light in the darkness. But we should always do that with great care and sensitivity. We don’t press the answers too hard, because to someone who is suffering greatly, answers given too easily can be very cold comfort – as in the case of Job and his friends.

In his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, ‘The Light of Faith’, Pope Francis writes, ‘Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey. To those who suffer, God does not provide arguments which explain everything; rather, his response is that of an accompanying presence, a history of goodness which touches every story of suffering and opens up a ray of light. In Christ, God himself wishes to share this path with us and to offer us his gaze so that we might see the light within it.’ (57)

So: God did not simply sympathise with us from afar. He came to suffer alongside us, to suffer with us – that is the original meaning of the word compassion: to ‘suffer with’ [Latin: *com* = ‘with’; *passio* = ‘suffering’]. Jesus enters into our suffering, giving it meaning and power. (On this Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, we entered into this in depth, as we listened to the reading of the Passion.)

Recalling from our earlier reflections: if we are living in union with Christ, with him living in our hearts by grace, then all our loving actions take on a divine and eternal value. In love and obedience to his Father, Jesus fully entered into our human suffering on the Cross. And united with him, our loving actions in response to suffering likewise enter with him into the victory of the Resurrection: each will bear an amazing fruit.

First, in this life, as spiritual power: God uses our acts of love and our acceptance of suffering to help others and bring grace to them, in ways we will never know until we reach heaven. And then in the life to come: each of our actions performed in union with Christ will blossom into an eternal reality. When Christ lives within us, nothing is lost or wasted.

And so it is that God comes into the very heart of human suffering and draws it into Resurrection. The Paschal Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ shows us that God’s love does not operate by stopping all possible evil, but by drawing life out of death – so that in the end, through Christ, Life will have the ultimate triumph in all things.