

TRINITY SUNDAY - YEAR C* (Homily 02)

“A Triune God Who Suffers”

(Proverbs 8:22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 1:1-5; John 16:12-15)

Every year the northern and western Canadian bishops invite a resource person to address them at their plenary. In 2007 Dr. Hannah Kassis, an expert on Islam, was asked to speak about the culture and religion of Islam.

Dr. Hannah’s love for the Muslims and his intimate knowledge of Islam shone through his presentations; so much so that he was asked why he did not become a Muslim.

The main reason he gave in response was because the Muslims have no concept of a suffering God. For the Muslims, Allah is One, Great and Almighty. All ninety nine attributes of the Supreme Being that they often pray have to do with the power and glory of Allah. It is impossible for a Muslim to conceive that Allah would have any weakness, any tendency to suffer in any way. For this reason, and because of his own faith in Jesus, a Messiah who was able to suffer, Dr. Kassis said he could never become a Muslim.

There is a great mystery, and great wisdom, in our faith in God as Trinity, as family and relationship, open to suffering for the sake of that relationship. Our faith is in Jesus Christ who, true to the will of the Father and empowered by the Spirit, showed the depth of the Father’s love through suffering.

In the Gospel today, Jesus plunges directly into the heart of this mystery. The Father and Jesus are one; all that Jesus has he has been given from the Father. The Spirit and Jesus are also one; all that the Spirit has he has received from Jesus. That Spirit, given to us by Jesus at Pentecost and through baptism, fills us with divine gifts, gifts that make us one with the Father.

In the second reading, St. Paul explores this mystery for the Romans. Paul teaches that faith in Jesus gains us access to the grace of God that is the Holy Spirit. That Spirit then fills us; pours into us, all kinds of gifts. One of those gifts is to be able to suffer like Jesus who is the suffering servant of God,

who suffered for us out of self sacrificial love. The Spirit of that same Jesus, according to St. Paul, will give us the strength and endurance to even boast of our sufferings for the sake of Jesus and out of love for others.

Paul then provides a whole spirituality of suffering. Suffering out of faith in Jesus and love for others produces endurance, and endurance produces character. How true it is that there are lessons in life that only suffering will teach us. That character then produces hope, a hope that is the assurance of the presence of God's Spirit within us. That hope is also a source of joy in being made like Christ who himself suffered for us. That is the mystery of our faith, faith in Jesus who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Let us turn to another expert on the nature of God, Fr. Cantalemba, the papal preacher, who puts it this way:

The Christian response to the problem of innocent suffering is wrapped up in one name: Jesus Christ! Jesus did not come to give us expert explanations about suffering; he came rather silently to take it upon himself. Taking it upon himself, however, he changed it entirely: from a sign of malediction, he made it an instrument of redemption.... Even more: he made it the supreme value, the highest order of greatness in this world. This is a type of suffering that brings us closer to God. Only God, in fact, suffers as innocent in an absolute sense.

We have all seen persons who have shown much love through the acceptance of perhaps a handicapped child, who have given themselves selflessly to that child and grown into patient, compassionate, beautiful human beings because of the suffering that they have accepted with faith and love. That is the mystery of life that connects with our Triune God who is family and relationship, and who in Jesus was able to show us the way of redemptive suffering.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now makes present for us the love of Jesus for the Father in accepting the cross. It is made possible through the power of the same Spirit that filled him with faith in the Father's love and empowers us to do the same.

So, unlike our Muslim friends, let us put our complete faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as family and relationship, and express that faith in our willingness to suffer for others as Jesus did for us.