

DEACON GEORGE'S HOMILY FOR 33rd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

It is easy for us to love God, and praise God, when life is great, when we are healthy, wealthy, and our work is easy. But how is our praise? when we are seriously ill, or our finances take a tumble, or we lose our jobs. Is our faith deep enough to get us through these difficult times. These difficulties may not be ours. They may be someone else's, someone who is very close to us. However, we still have the same feelings inside. So, in the midst of these difficulties can we still love and praise God? Because, today, that is what Jesus is asking of us. Many good people lose their faith when they see all the evil and suffering in the world. They lose faith because they find it impossible to look into the eyes of a starving child, or the faces of those bombed by their own people and yet still praise God. They lose faith because they cannot be a witness, to all the atrocities perpetrated by man upon man and yet still believe that God cares for them. It is hard for them to see that questions like these, are answered by the argument "*Free Will*", when they see that so many people in the world have no opportunity of free will. No-one chooses to die of starvation, no-one elects to be blown up by a bomb. But, as well as these being their questions, these are our questions too.

Sadly, there are no ready answers to these questions. And as we listen to today's Gospel, we find that neither has Jesus any quick answers to these questions. He simply calls on us to endure, in spite of all the horrors and the suffering around us. But we cry out. "*if only we had the answers*", then our faith would not have to endure. However, it is because these questions are still with us, that we must pray for an enduring faith. Today, we certainly need to pray, for an enduring faith.

But first, Jesus gives his listeners some grim pictures of the future. He tells those, who are admiring the beauty of the Temple, that their Temple will be totally destroyed, and not one stone will be left standing. However, years later, in 70 AD, when Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, he left one wall standing, for the Jews to wail at. And this wall is still there today.

Jesus also warns his listeners against deceivers, who claim they know the future, and pose as saviours. These people prey on those who are filled with a sense of defeat, and a fear of the future. But real saviours do not manipulate fear, in order to win followers.

Next he warns them of international wars. In Jesus' time, it was swords, spears and bows and arrows. Now, it nuclear missiles, cruise missiles, land-mines, bombs, and drones. There is more to fear today, especially if these weapons are in hands of fanatics and terrorists.

He next mentions natural disasters, earthquakes, plagues, famines and floods. We have seen the devastation caused by floods and earthquakes. We have equipment that can measure an earthquake on a Richter scale, but it can't measure human loss.

We have advanced tremendously in medicine, but we are still faced with incurable diseases, on a large scale. We can produce enough food to feed the world; it is just that the distribution is wrong. In the news we were told of how much good food, in our own country, is wasted and thrown into the skips.

Jesus warns his followers that they will be persecuted for their beliefs. Men and women down through the ages have valued their faith more than their life, and refused to change their commitment to the Gospel, for the sake of their own survival. They resolutely lived, not only the words of Jesus, but the pattern of his life. From day one onwards, all throughout history, Christians have been persecuted, and none more so today, in Sudan, the middle East and Nigeria, the list goes on and on. Just as modern day weapons have increased in their enormity and power, so has persecution in numbers and ubiquity.

And finally, Jesus warns of betrayal. He warns them not to be so naively optimistic, to suppose that families will understand, and support them, in their new life of faith, as followers of Christ. Today, many converts feel betrayed when they are orphaned by their families, and often their families sever all ties with them. Once I had over forty relatives, now I only have a wife, three children and eleven grandchildren. I also lost my job and lost my friends, the day I crossed the Tiber. But, I have no regrets, whatsoever.

At the end of all this doom and gloom, you might be wondering where can I turn to for comfort. Jesus acknowledges the truth, that "*faith makes its own suffering*." However, Jesus is not trying to manipulate our fear. He is trying to make our faith face the reality of suffering in this world.

Our faith is not an add-on to our lives, that brings us warmth and comfort. It is a relationship with a person who knew and experienced the meaning of suffering and endurance. Our faith is a desire to be part of his life and he part of our lives. It is a desire that no-one, or any act of nature, can take from us. It is a desire, we hold tight, to our death, whatever death that be.

Our faith is 24/7. It is inside us, and outside us, every moment of our life, sleeping and waking. The world can throw everything at us, good and bad, but our faith remains absolute. Because we know, that there is someone who loves us, walks with us, and shares with us, every moment of our lives. He can't make all the bad times go away, but he can, and does, carry us through them. He will stick with us, therefore we must stick with him. That way "*our endurance will win us our lives*".

Our life, is an everlasting life, where one day will see him face to face, see him as he really is. A life where, "*He will wipe away all tears from their eyes, there will be no more death, no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone*".