

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Yet while Christ was here on earth he pleaded with God, praying with tears and agony of soul to the only one who would save him from premature death. And God heard his prayers because of his strong desire to obey God at all times. And even though Jesus was God's Son, he had to learn from experience what it was like to obey when obeying meant suffering. It was after he had proved himself perfect in this experience that Jesus became the Giver of eternal salvation to all those who obey him. [Hebrews 5:7-9]

There is a story about a little bird that was trying to fly to warmer climate in order to escape the winter cold. On the way the bird encountered a snow storm. It grew so cold that the bird fell to the ground in a farm. The bird was about to freeze to death when a cow passed by and dropped cow manure on him. The cow manure was warm on the bird and prevented the bird from freezing to death. Soon the bird felt so comfortable in the warm manure that he began to sing. The farm cat heard the bird singing in the manure, dug the little bird out of the manure and ate him. The moral of the story is: Not everyone who drops manure on you is your enemy, and not everyone who digs you out of the manure is your friend.

Suffering can bring salvation to the sufferer as well as to others. Today's 2nd reading from Hebrews tells us that 'even though Jesus was God's Son, he had to learn from experience what it was like to obey when obeying meant suffering' (5:8-9). In other words, Jesus' suffering was beneficial both to him personally (he learned obedience) and to others (he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him). Suffering and privations, when accepted as Jesus did, can become one of the best things that can happen in the lives of believers.

Among the books of the New Testament it is Hebrews which best develops the doctrine of Jesus Christ as the eternal high priest who stands for humanity in our dealings with God. He gives two main reasons why Jesus and Jesus alone fulfils the conditions for this priesthood. One is that it was God Himself who chose him for the office. '*Another thing to remember is that no one can be a high priest just because he wants to be. He has to be called by God for this work in the same way God chose Aaron.* (5:4). Jesus was specifically chosen for the office when at his baptism a voice was heard from heaven which said, '*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*' (Matthew 3:17).

The second qualification that Jesus has for the priestly office is that he has experienced the bitter realities of the human condition, including suffering and death. Hebrews alludes to Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane where the man Jesus '*pleaded with God, praying with tears and agony of soul to the only one who would save him from premature death. And God heard his prayers because of his strong desire to obey God at all times.*' (5:7) To understand what Hebrews says here regarding the reverent submission of Jesus and that he was heard by the Father, we need to look again at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus' prayer in the Garden was made up of two petitions. One of the petitions is conditional: '*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me*'; the other is absolute and without conditions: '*yet not what I want but what you want*' (Matthew 26:39). The second petition overrides the first. One can, therefore, say that in Gethsemane Jesus made only one prayer, a prayer of total submission to the will of God. This is his one prayer that was heard: God's will was done in his suffering and death. Ultimately even his prayer to be saved from death was heard when God raised him from the dead to live and reign with Him in glory for ever.

Why is it necessary for the priest to pass through the school of pain and suffering? It is so that he will be '*able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness*' (5:2). There is no trial or suffering that we are going through that Jesus cannot understand. He understands our struggles and deals gently with us because he himself had to go through similar trials and temptations.

As we stand at the threshold of Holy Week, the church reminds us that we are called to be not only beneficiaries of the priestly life and death of Jesus, we are called also to be priests with Jesus after his example. There is a theological saying that "All are priests, some are priests, only one is a priest." Reflection on the unique priesthood of Jesus should lead us to reflect on the ministerial priesthood to which some are called by ordination as well as the universal priesthood to which all the faithful are called in baptism. As we step into Holy Week, may our prayer to God be "Your will be done in our lives," just as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane.