

Sunday Message

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

THE WORD

Year B • 4 February 2024 • Psalter Week 1

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

JOB 7:1-4, 6-7



You're probably familiar with the film *Shadowlands*, about Belfast-born writer, C.S. Lewis.

For years his life has followed the same comfortable, predictable patterns. He is a lecturer and a writer, a pipe-smoking bachelor who lives in his book-lined Oxford home with his brother. His Narnia books and his theology have made him famous, and he gives comforting talks about God and religion.

One of his books, called *The Problem of Pain*, explores the mystery of suffering. Lewis is confident that he knows the purpose of suffering: It is God's way of perfecting us, of carving away the wrong parts, of leaving a soul ready to enter heaven. It's a nice, rational way of thinking of suffering.

And then, Lewis's life is disrupted. He meets a divorced American named Joy Davidman. She wrote him an admiring letter, which led to her first visit to England, along with her young son.

Joy and Lewis are very different. She is loud and vivacious. He is in a comfortable rut - dinners at his college dining hall, evenings in front of the fire, reading while the wireless plays classical music.

Lewis received her as a courtesy, but soon he begins to bring her along to his events and they grow close. But he is so settled in his ways that he hardly knows what to do when he begins to realise he is in love. This buttoned-down intellectual surprises himself by falling in love. Joy turns his life upside down.

Then tragedy strikes. She contracts terminal cancer. When she finds herself in awful agony, his theory about pain and all his certainties

begin to fall apart. Grief overwhelms him. He has just found love, and now he's losing it.

After Joy dies, he writes a very different book about pain called *A Grief Observed*. It describes his reactions, as a Christian, to his wife's death. His rational faith fell to pieces when confronted with devastatingly personal suffering. He writes, 'Where is God? Go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.'

But though Lewis's rational faith is tested by Joy's death, it does not collapse. Through the darkness of this experience he even claims to have come to love his wife even more. God had helped him realise that because the love he and Joy had for each other had reached its earthly limit, it was ready for its heavenly fulfilment.

Lewis's loss is like Job's in today's first reading. Job's life is a success. He is a prosperous landowner, blessed with a happy home, and a strong religious faith. God boasts to Satan about how virtuous Job is, but Satan retorts that Job's faith would collapse if his prosperity collapsed.

God lets Satan test Job, and then everything goes wrong for Job. He loses his money, his family, everything. His friends' pious words of comfort offer him no consolation. Still, Job clings to his faith. Though it is tested, he won't let it go. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Suffering, especially innocent suffering, is one of the great tests of faith. Like Job, like C.S. Lewis, we hold onto our faith because we know that it gives us the strength and fortitude to face the difficult times. ■

REFLECT

Like Job and C.S. Lewis, we're all acquainted with suffering. Marriages collapse, relationships sunder, debts pile up, sickness strikes, loved ones die. The world seems full of injustice, cruelty, caprice, misery. There are three things we can say in the face of pain.

First, to always appreciate the now, the present moment - your health, your loved ones, the beauty of life and the people who make your heart leap. Towards the end of *Shadowlands*, Lewis doesn't want to talk to Joy about her dying, but she says, "The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal." The sadness you experience now is because of the happiness you had before. Appreciate the good you have now, in this moment. Treasure it.

Second, God is with us when we suffer. Jesus entered fully into the darkness of human suffering. In C.S. Lewis's words, on the cross Jesus turned to God and found a door slammed in his face when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Yet God did not forsake Jesus, but brought him through death into the fullness of life. The Jesus nailed to a cross is the same risen Lord who is with us in our own suffering, just as he was with the suffering and the broken in today's Gospel. He is with us as one who knows our experience from the inside. And so we can confidently turn to him in our distress.

Third, do not be afraid. In 2018, English politician Tessa Jowell spoke in the House of Lords about the brain cancer that would soon kill her. Her words, she said, in the face of suffering were the same last words Seamus Heaney uttered before he died: "Don't be afraid."

Because we are Christians, at the end of the day, no matter what faces us, we know we don't have to be afraid. ■

DO

Visit or contact a loved one or neighbour who is ill or housebound. Spend quality time with them.

SAY

"Lord, help me to know that you always hold me in the palm of your hand."

LEARN

God is close to those who suffer. God never abandons us.

PRAY

Pray today for all who are suffering and those who care for them.

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

O come, let us worship God
and bow low before the God who made us,
for he is the Lord our God.

GLORIA

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

COLLECT

Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care,
that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly
grace,
they may be defended always by your protection.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the
Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

FIRST READING

Job 7:1-4, 6-7

A reading from the book of Job.
Job began to speak:
Is not man's life on earth nothing more than
pressed service,
his time no better than hired drudgery?
Like the slave, sighing for the shade,
or the workman with no thought but his wages,
months of delusion I have assigned to me,
nothing for my own but nights of grief.
Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?'
Risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!'
Restlessly I fret till twilight falls.
Swifter than a weaver's shuttle my days have
passed,
and vanished, leaving no hope behind.
Remember that my life is but a breath,
and that my eyes will never again see joy.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM

Psalm 146 (147): 1-6

Response:

**Praise the Lord who heals the
broken-hearted.**

or
Alleluia!

1. Praise the Lord for he is good;
sing to our God for he is loving:
to him our praise is due. (R.)
2. The Lord builds up Jerusalem
and brings back Israel's exiles,
he heals the broken-hearted,

he binds up all their wounds.
He fixes the number of the stars;
he calls each one by its name. (R.)

3. Our Lord is great and almighty;
his wisdom can never be measured.
The Lord raises the lowly;
he humbles the wicked to the dust. (R.)

SECOND READING 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the
Corinthians.

I do not boast of preaching the gospel, since it
is a duty which has been laid on me; I should be
punished if I did not preach it! If I had chosen
this work myself, I might have been paid for it,
but as I have not, it is a responsibility which has
been put into my hands. Do you know what my
reward is? It is this: in my preaching, to be able
to offer the Good News free, and not insist on
the rights which the gospel gives me.

So though I am not a slave of any man I have
made myself the slave of everyone so as to win
as many as I could. For the weak I made myself
weak: I made myself all things to all men in order
to save some at any cost; and I still do this, for
the sake of the gospel, to have a share in its
blessings.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
I am the light of the world, says the Lord;
anyone who follows me will have the light of
life.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL

Mark 1:29-39

A reading from the holy Gospel according to
Mark.

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with
James and John straight to the house of Simon
and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had
gone to bed with fever, and they told him about
her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the
hand and helped her up. And the fever left her
and she began to wait on them.

That evening, after sunset, they brought
to him all who were sick and those who were
possessed by devils. The whole town came
crowding round the door, and he cured many
who were suffering from diseases of one kind
or another; he also cast out many devils, but he
would not allow them to speak, because they
knew who he was.

In the morning, long before dawn, he got
up and left the house, and went off to a
lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his
companions set out in search of him, and when
they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking
for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to
the neighbouring country towns, so that I can
preach there too, because that is why I came.'
And he went all through Galilee, preaching in
their synagogues and casting out devils.

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

**I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.**

**I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,**

born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with
the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
(all bow during the next three lines)
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
Virgin Mary,
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored
and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness
of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the
dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

O Lord, our God,
who once established these created things
to sustain us in our frailty,
grant, we pray,
that they may become for us now
the Sacrament of eternal life.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

**Let them thank the Lord for his mercy,
his wonders for the children of men,
for he satisfies the thirsty soul,
and the hungry he fills with good things.**

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

O God, who have willed that we be partakers
in the one Bread and the one Chalice,
grant us, we pray, so to live
that, made one in Christ,
we may joyfully bear fruit
for the salvation of the world.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

I often think of the film, *Babette's Feast*, when
a well-served meal brought together a divided
group in mutual love and forgiveness. I also
think of a saying in the film that the only thing
we can take with us when we die is what we
have given away. May the good God help
us in the coming week to live what we have
celebrated here together.

(Fr Sean Kealy CSSp)