

## 7.2.2023 Trinity 4 (Romans 8:18-23)

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we learn that two thousand years ago, while walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus “*saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed Him*” (Matthew 4:18-20). As soon as Jesus called them, Peter and his brother Andrew gave up themselves to His service. They left their nets and boats and their trade as fishermen, to become His disciples, and this decision to leave the familiar and comfortable behind, in order to follow our Lord, would set their lives on a path that would end with St. Peter crucified upside down in Rome, and his brother Andrew tied to an X-shaped cross in Greece, where he was crucified.

Two thousand years ago, on the same Galilean shore, Jesus “*saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him*” (Matthew 4:21-22). James and John were business partners with Peter (Luke 5:1-11), and the historical narrative that St. Luke conveys in his Gospel speaks of these young men working with their father as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. This appears to be a good life, a good life they immediately left behind to follow our Lord. A good life that would be traded for one which would end with James beheaded by king Herod (Acts 12:1-2), and his brother John beaten for preaching Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:40-42), and eventually exiled on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). As Jesus had prophesied, these brothers would truly drink of His cup of suffering (Matthew 20:23).

Saints: Peter, Andrew, James, John, and many others left houses, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, children, and lands for Jesus’ sake (Matthew 19:29). They gave up good, familiar, comfortable lives to answer His call, and in their example we recognize that even such complete sacrifice did not shield them from “*the sufferings of this present time*” (Romans 8:18). As we read in our Epistle today, even we, “*which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body*” (Romans 8:23). Though God worked through these Apostles in miraculous ways, though the fruits of the Spirit were supernaturally

manifested in their lives as they healed the sick and even raised the dead (Acts 9:32-42), they themselves were not immune from suffering and death at the hands of their enemies, and so we see that being a disciple of our Lord and God does not ensure that one will be saved from the *trials and sorrows* of this world (John 16:33). In fact, the lives of the saints reveal the challenge, and the cost, of being an authentic disciple of Christ.

Consider Paul, another saint who, *through much tribulation* and suffering (Acts 14:22), let go of what is good in this life, in order to take hold of what is best. In his letter to the Philippians (3:4-11), Paul described many of the good things that were his in this life. He wrote about his circumcision on the eighth day, said that he was “*of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.*” He spoke of his knowledge and strict adherence to the law as a Pharisee, his zeal and righteousness. He had gained so much through the course of his life, *but* Paul declared, “*But, whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him*” (vs. 7-9).

Before his conversion, Paul was living what his peers would consider to be a good life. His own words certainly indicate that others would have seen him as a man who was blessed by God in so many ways, but the greatest blessing God bestowed on Paul would be given to him on the road to Damascus when he came to know Christ Jesus as his Lord. Like Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Paul received the “*upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3:14), and yet this call to go higher would mark the end of lower desires. Those things that comprise the world’s definition of the good life would now be rubbish to Paul, for he was, according to God, “*a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel*” (Acts 9:15), and while there could be no greater blessing, no higher call, than to be an instrument in God’s hand used to proclaim His holy name, this blessing would come at great cost to Paul, for God said, “*I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*” (Acts 9:16).

St. Paul was a chosen instrument of God, who endured much suffering, who paid a high price to proclaim the name of Jesus before the Gentiles and kings

and the children of Israel. Holy Scripture confirms this truth, for we know that Paul proclaimed the Gospel of our Lord in the Gentile capital of Rome, but at great cost, because he did so as a prisoner. The high price Paul paid to proclaim the Gospel to king Felix was again, imprisonment, and the cost of preaching to the children of Israel, the price of sharing the Gospel with his own people, was persecution and suffering, for Paul reached out to them and in return he tells us that *“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one”* (2 Corinthians 11:24).

From the world’s perspective trading a good life for one in which you’re repeatedly beaten and persecuted is foolishness. From the world’s perspective trading a good life for one in which you’re exiled or beheaded or crucified like the One you follow is foolishness. The world would say only a fool would give up what is good, familiar, and comfortable to embrace the challenging, costly, even deadly life of authentic Christianity, but saints Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Paul were no fools. To use the words of another man who the world has called foolish, it was the martyred missionary Jim Elliot who wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” The saints of God are not fools, and their faithful desire to follow our Lord immediately, to be like Him in life and death, encourages us as we endeavor, by the grace of God, to turn away from selfish, comfortable desires to the end that we may meet the challenge, and bear the cross, of offering all we are - our selves, our souls and bodies to God completely.

In the examples of the saints we learn that being a disciple of our Lord and God does not ensure that one will be saved from persecution and suffering. In fact the lives, and the deaths, of saints like Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Paul are historical, irrefutable evidence that there are times when it is God who shows a saint how much they *must suffer for the sake of my name*. The fact that we *“must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22 NLT) is a hard saying, a difficult truth that may lead us to ask: How do we make sense of the additional hardship and suffering Christians so often experience after we’ve heard our Lord’s call and turned to follow Him?

In response to that question, I’ll leave you with this thought, a quote from St. Augustine, who wrote, “Let us understand that God is a physician, and that

suffering is a medicine for salvation, not a punishment for damnation.” The Great Physician does not cause suffering, He redeems suffering. God only permits evil to exist in this world because He knows that He can bring a greater good out of it: Salvation. We look no further than the Cross for evidence of that truth - from the worst evil, God brought the greatest good.

Suffering is a medicine for salvation, a medicine that rids us of those things on this earth that we worship instead of God. Suffering rid St. Paul of pride, in his lineage, in knowledge, in adherence to the Law, in his zeal and righteousness, and suffering rids us of the idols we often worship instead of God: our careers, money, possessions, health. Though it is often extremely painful, especially from a worldly perspective, to suffer such loss, we must remember that in the end no person can keep any of these things. Therefore the saint who hears our Lord’s call, responds immediately, and counts all things as rubbish in order to gain Christ and be found in Him, has given what they cannot keep to gain that which they cannot lose - the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus said, “*Come, follow Me.*” By the grace of God may we do so immediately, and if we must, suffer for it, or in the words of our sermon hymn: “So by my woes to be, nearer my God to thee, nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee.”