



24<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Biv  
Excerpts From Isaiah 50, James 2 & Mark 8

## God's Way

Suffering is not a sign God has deserted us. Jesus suffered, and our suffering is a participation in his act of glorious redemption.  
Fr David King – 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021

*Please look at the Gospel before reading this (Mark 8.27-35)*

### 1. Margaret

I'm sure you've been moved, as have I, by the images of 9/11 that have been going around recently. And there continues to be much suffering in the world. In this homily, I would just like to slightly re-frame how we view suffering in our lives, because one way or another that will come to us all. We're tempted to think it's a sign that God has abandoned us, but as we shall see, I'm not so sure that is true. But to kick us off, here is the story of someone who was *very* close to God, but who also suffered greatly.

- Margaret Middleton (no relation to Catherine) was born in York in 1556, during the difficult years after the Reformation. Her father died when she was fourteen years old and a year later she married. They lived on The Shambles, which, if any of you know the city of York well, is a very historic street with medieval buildings that is still there, right in the middle of the city. But a few years later, Margaret Clitherow (as she now was) did something very courageous that would change the course of her life, she converted to being a Catholic. She was just 18 years old.
- Now, during that time, that was, believe me, a very courageous thing to do, no one would have done it were it not born out of total conviction that this was what God wanted for them. Not attending the local Protestant Church was a fineable offence, and was inevitably going to draw suspicion and Margaret was indeed fined and imprisoned for this offence on a number of occasions, starting when she was just twenty one years old. Her third son was actually born in prison.
- So Margaret was no stranger to suffering, but when she was out of prison, she was determined to carry on living out her faith. The Catholic community at that time was all 'underground', small but very faithful. Hiding and aiding priests who travelled around teaching people and providing the sacraments was a capital offence, punishable by death, but Margaret insisted on being involved and her house became one of the most important hiding places for priests in the whole of the north of England at that time, and many secret Masses were celebrated in her home. She had incredible courage and this enabled many people to be sustained in their faith during those years.
- But there came a point when it was all getting tense and dangerous, the authorities were on to her, and eventually her house was searched. During the search, a frightened boy revealed the location of the hiding place where she concealed the priests, and Margaret was instantly arrested and sentenced to death and on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1586, when Margaret was just 30 years old, she was executed on Ouse Bridge in York. A big wooden door was placed on her and loaded with weights until she was crushed to death, and believe me I have spared you the grim details. She was pregnant with their fourth child at the time. Margaret was canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970 and is among the 40 martyrs of England and Wales, and her feast day was just a couple of weeks ago. If ever you go to York, there is a small shrine (a plaque on the wall basically) to her on The Shambles.

## 2. Peter

- Now, I feel that we have been so influenced by the western obsession with success and achievement and accomplishment, that we tend to think of suffering as a complete failure. We tend to view it as a sign that God has abandoned us. We think he is not there in suffering, we think that it is a sign he doesn't love us. On top of all that we might even feel *guilt* when we are suffering, because we are not 'happy' and 'joyful' as Christians ought to be.
  - And all of these thoughts go round and round in our heads. But this is why reading the scriptures is so important, because the Gospel reading today (and of course the Isaiah reading) definitely have something to say about all this.
- In the Gospel reading Jesus says that *he* is destined to suffer grievously, Peter is not happy with this and objects. And Jesus says "Get behind me Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but man's." Wow! You see Peter is so like us (or we are like Peter). Suffering doesn't feel right to him, it's not supposed to happen, it has no value, there's no purpose in it, he wants to protect Jesus from suffering, as we do our loved ones. But, as Jesus says, that is man's way of thinking! Suffering is right at the heart of God's way of thinking!
- Jesus knew he had to suffer. Why? Because it was all over the scriptures for those who had an eye to see it. Isaiah spoke eloquently and plainly of how the Messiah would establish the kingdom and defeat the ancient serpent by taking the full force of the enemy's blows upon himself. Jesus won salvation for the human race *through suffering*. It is *not* a failure. It was, for Jesus, the decisive moment of victory.

## 3. Jesus

- The thing is, I think most of us would be able to grasp the idea that *Jesus'* suffering was in some way redemptive, that *his* suffering had value. We just don't see how our suffering is connected to that. But that's the thing, in the Catholic Church we *do* believe our suffering is connected to his.
- The suffering of illness, of cancer, the suffering of bereavement, the suffering of a grievous accident, suffering caused by someone else's selfishness, the suffering of betrayal, or being bullied or discriminated against by others, *certainly* the suffering caused by witnessing to our faith as in the case of Margaret Clitherow. This is not a sign that God has deserted us! Rather it is a sign that Jesus has called us to share in his passion, and nothing makes us more like Jesus than when we are carrying our cross (and I would actually go even further – because our suffering is a share in his, it is also, therefore, redemptive).
- There's a beautiful line in Psalm 34 that says it all. 'The Lord is close to the broken hearted – those whose spirit is crushed he will save.' How amazing that whoever wrote that, 3000 years ago, discerned that God was not absent in suffering, but, rather, was right there in the midst of it. So yes, there's joy, there always will be for the Christian, because Jesus has vanquished the enemy and in time all things will be gathered to him, but the fundamental vocation of a disciple is one of suffering, of sharing in Jesus' passion – that is what he calls us to. And I know suffering doesn't feel like that a lot of the time, and that's the thing, you can't glamorise it, suffering is suffering – it's painful, but therein lies the challenge, not to resent its presence in our lives, but rather to see it with the eyes of faith, recognising it as a share in Jesus' suffering for the world.

*Jesus, give me the eyes of faith, to see my suffering as a share in yours, and to know you are with me through it all*