

The Second Sunday after Christmas
5 December, Anno Domini 2020
1 Peter 4:12-19
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

From the very beginning of His earthly life, our Savior was subjected to suffering. He was hated and hunted before He could even put sentences together. One of the first things he had to do was flee the Land of Promise and hide in the very country that had enslaved Israel and tried to destroy them. The holy family had to hide in the very country from which God had delivered them by plague and pestilence and the watery walls of the Red Sea. But that would only be the beginning. There was no time in Jesus' life when He wasn't persecuted and forced to endure great affliction and sorrow.

In our Lord and brother we see a very hard reality to accept - to bear the Name of Jesus, the very Name which is our source of help and comfort in every need, is also to be hated by the devil and the world and even our own flesh. There are no exceptions. It doesn't matter your age, your income, your gender, or your ethnicity. As St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Galatians, we are all one in Christ Jesus. That doesn't mean that all will suffer in the same way. But all will suffer. You will suffer for believing and confessing the Name of Jesus and ordering your life according to the divine Scriptures. Do not imagine, as some vainly do, that they can avoid it. The suffering of Christ's Church on earth will end when the devil becomes a Christian.

There are two particular dangers that we face in the midst of suffering. The first is that we equate our suffering with punishment. When we confess that salvation is found in Jesus alone and in no one else and are then accused of being closed-minded and arrogant; when we hold up the Word of God and defend marriage as being only between one man and one woman and in response we are labeled as bigots and threatened with lawsuits; when we declare with Scripture that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ and we are anathematized by those who preach that we are saved by our works and our decisions - it is very easy to begin to think that perhaps we are the ones who are wrong, who have misunderstood the Word of God and that the hatred and persecution of so much of the world, especially from those who appear to be of great knowledge and importance, is God's punishment for our error and arrogance. At the very least, isn't it a matter of interpretation? The Blessed Doctor Martin Luther was tempted by these

thoughts often as the weight of the whole Papacy as well the sword of the Holy Roman Empire were set against him to destroy him. Who was insignificant Luther to challenge so many wise and holy and powerful people? When our Lord, Jesus Christ, spoke the truth and went about doing the merciful work of His heavenly Father, He was not well received by most. Some thought He was a drunk. Others thought He was a heretic and blasphemer. Others charged Him with rebellion against Caesar. The people of Nazareth, His home town, tried to drive Jesus off a cliff because of His preaching. More than once the Pharisees had stones in their hands ready to throw at our Lord's head.

Jesus could have looked at the hatred of those people and come to the conclusion that He was doing or saying something wrong and God was punishing Him for it. He could have questioned if He still was God's beloved Son and if His Father was still pleased with Him. If we had been driven into the wilderness and denied food for forty days would we not conclude that God hated us? And more than any of those times, as Jesus was hanging there on the cross among condemned criminals, it's not hard to imagine why people looked at that and said "If God wants Him, let Him deliver Him," implying, of course, that God didn't want Him and wasn't actually pleased with Him. The cross would seem to be the conclusive denial of Jesus' claim "I do the will of my Father." If He had been, then why would God allow such a thing to happen to Him? Why would God allow Him to suffer so terribly, to be humiliated so deeply? Surely that can't be loving!

Unless it is the epitome of love for the whole world, offering the Son of God, who was pleased even to do this will of His Father, as payment for our sins. Jesus' death isn't the whole story. None of it can be understood until Easter, when the one who suffered and died as the chief of sinners, was resurrected and vindicated as the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world and whose every Word is divine truth. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead not only demonstrates the truth of all that He preached and did, but also that His suffering was not punishment from God for His disobedience, but instead, the hatred of the devil poured out in full force against all that is true. Our Lord didn't suffer for doing wrong but for doing and saying everything right. It was His innocence and perfect obedience that made Him the acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world. His suffering under the wrath of God was not on His own account but ours. He bore our punishment so that as His dear children we may say "I am not being punished. I am blessed to suffer for the Name of the One who suffered for me."

Dear Christian, your Lord and Savior, suffered greatly during His earthly life but not because God hated Him. Rather, in Jesus' suffering, the wickedness of the

world is brought to light because it hated and persecuted Him who is the very essence and embodiment of truth and love. In Jesus, who was hated from the moment He was conceived, we see clearly painted for us exactly what use the world has for Christ, and the lot of all who dare to confess and walk according to the divine truth. The only way to avoid the devil and the world's hatred, and even the hatred of your own flesh, is to deny the truth, to deny your Lord, and to give in to their will which will only destroy you as it does them.

Thus Peter urges you to consider yourself blessed when you are counted worthy of suffering the hatred and persecution of the world because your treasure is Jesus and you despise as rubbish all that the world prizes most highly. This suffering is one of the marks of faith and the true Church because where the truth is and where the Name of Christ is proclaimed, there the devil will attack in hopes of destroying you and silencing the saving truth exactly as He did with your Lord.

The other danger is that we conflate suffering on account of sin with suffering for Name of Christ. Because sin is a rejection of the divine will and order, sin naturally brings with it consequences for us and others which will ultimately mean suffering. Sin breaks and divides and hurts. Whether it is murder or gossip or despising preaching and the Sacraments or teaching false doctrine or withholding your tithes - sin always hurts. Sin is by nature destructive because it tears us away from God and drives out the Holy Spirit. When we rebel against the divine will we foolishly attack our own selves as well as everyone around us because the fact of the matter is that we live in a world that God created and ordered, not us. Living any other way than He has ordained, living contrary to the Ten Commandments, any of them, is self-harm. Thus the Lord has graciously instituted and ordained the office of the governing authorities to protect those who keep the law and punish those who seek to kill and steal and harm. Likewise, the Lord has instituted and ordained the Office of the Keys in the Church to forgive those who confess their sins but to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent. Those who break the law must suffer some kind of penalty or we will all be encouraged to act against our neighbor with impunity. Murderers and thieves and evildoers and meddlers need to be punished for their loveless deeds against their neighbors. And St. Peter warns and urges us against this kind of suffering. We are to love our neighbor and do good to him. When we suffer for our sin we have no one to blame but ourselves. This is not suffering for the name of Christ. Just the opposite, really. It is suffering because we are unwilling to bear Christ's Name and live as a child of the light. It is suffering because we decided that it was a good idea to walk out onto 75 at rush hour with our eyes closed because it sounded fun.

Children of God, do not suffer for the sake of evil. Do not put yourself in harm's way by indulging your flesh and trying to compromise with the world. You will hurt yourself and in gaining the world as your friend you will have lost the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. This suffering is a suffering that only leads to eternal death.

But you do not need to be afraid to suffer for the sake of Christ. You have seen how this suffering ends. The suffering of those who cling to Christ and speak the truth always ends in resurrection. When you are persecuted for the faith, you stand in the great company of the prophets and apostles and martyrs who have offered their blood as witnesses to the resurrection and who now wear the crown of life. The suffering and death of Jesus has prepared your way. All His children must take up their cross and follow. But you are not alone. Christ Himself goes with you. Your Baptism stands as a firm testament that, despite how fiercely and loudly the devil and the world rage, they are wrong. You are God's beloved child and He is most certainly pleased with you. He affirms this to you not only in Word but also in the Body and Blood of His dear Son which He gives as constant testament to the forgiveness of all your sins and the resurrection which awaits you.

In the Name of +Jesus.