

DIVINE MERCY IN THE SERVICE OF HUMAN MISERY

(Reflection for the 5th Sun, Ord Yr B 07.02.21 By Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

Today we mark the 5th Sunday of the Ordinary Year. The arc of the liturgical year is beginning to bend towards the Lenten season which is a period when we liturgically live the experience of the intersection of human misery and divine mercy. Today's readings, therefore, hint at these Lenten dynamics.

In the 1st Reading (Job 7:1-7), Job describes his life, in reality, man's life on earth as a transient, tiring, miserable and hopeless existence: like a term of servitude, like days of a hired man or of a slave, characterized by unending nights of misery and sickness (vv. 1-5), a life so brief, and like the wind, flying faster than a weaver's shuttle (vv. 6-7).

This passage is part of Job's response to the first of his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) who had come to comfort him as he battled the fact of inexplicable and unjustifiable misery. Eliphaz had sought to make sense of Job's suffering, arguing that God may be disciplining Job, for which if he be only patient, he will enjoy a happy future (see Job 4-5). From the beginning of Job's story, it is clear that Job is innocent, hence his suffering is not a punishment for his sin: "that man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1b).

Therefore, Job replies Eliphaz pointing out the fact that his pain cannot be simply explained in terms of divine discipline, for his pain is more profound than mere discipline; moreover, he does not have both the strength to endure such pain and the time to wait for any possible happy future, hence, his description of the brute fact of the brevity of human life and the fatigue which often characterizes it.

The book of Job, written probably by a Jerusalem theologian during the Persian period, generally battles with the question of the suffering of the innocent. All known traditional explanations such as divine retribution and divine discipline, fail to satisfactorily make sense of the suffering of the innocent Job and certainly, of the suffering of many innocents in our world.

Before the mystery of suffering, therefore, our tendency to question whether we are deserving of it or not reflects some sort of the retributive mentality. The case of Job teaches us instead, to be honest about our experiences of suffering and to concentrate on encountering in our misery, God's mercy which heals and saves. As the Responsorial Psalm reminds us, "Great is our Lord and almighty; His wisdom is beyond reckoning" (Psalm 147:5). What we know of his ways of doing things is that "He heals the broken hearted and binds up all their wounds" (Psalm 147:3)

In the 2nd Reading (1 Corinthians 9:16-23), Paul underscores the gratuity of apostleship. Despite coming from a tradition that fully supports claiming his rights to material support as recompense for providing spiritual services (see 1 Cor 9:3-14), Paul makes no claims to these rights and refrains from boasting on account of the spiritual services he was providing (9:15-16). He rather emphasizes the fact that he was commissioned in trust, for which he does not expect material reward for the Gospel he preached. In this way, Paul made both the gospel and himself free to all, being able to adapt to the condition of all his audiences so as to make himself understandable by all in order to save all (9:17-23).

Thus, Paul teaches us, especially ministers of the Gospel, to shun practices and breakaway from traditions that make the Gospel a burden to bear instead of a yoke that lightens up the burden. The Gospel, that of Jesus Christ, should make us feel liberated and not imprisoned, saved and not condemned, delivered from and not handed over to, healed and not sickened.

In the Gospel (Mark 1:29-39), we see an exemplary attitude of how humans should behave when visited by misery or suffering, and we also see how God relates to human suffering. Simon (and his friends) whose mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, turned to Jesus and related to him her situation (vv. 29-30). Jesus approaches the suffering of the woman with tenderness, taking her by the hand and lifting her up, thus restoring her to health (v.31). Following this, many more sick and possessed people were brought to Jesus who healed them and cast out from them the demons that had been tormenting them.

Thus, the Gospel teaches us to learn to turn to God and hand over to him our distress and hardship and those of our dear ones, seeking divine intervention and divine succour instead of activating our retributive mentality, trying uselessly to question whether we are deserving of suffering or not, in search of where to place a blame.

When we turn to God, mercy is his name; he heals, restores and alleviates our suffering. God does not relent in doing this; for he goes about everywhere doing good. Indeed, praise the Lord who heals the broken-hearted! And when he has done all or any of these, may we learn to get up and bear the witness of service like Simon's mother-in-law and those virtuous women of the New Testament who ministered to Jesus (see Mark 15:40-41).