

**Twelfth Sunday *per annum***  
**Year A, 2026**

Jer 20:10-13  
Ps 69

Rom 5:12-15  
Mt 10:26-38

*Compassion and the problem of suffering*

Last Sunday, reflecting on the gospel, we explored how God is compassionate, and we considered how it is problematic that Christianity is viewed as focused on sin and judgment rather than on compassion. This, I said, is the problem of Christian compassion, a problem that we can correct by consistently acting with compassion, on a personal level and on a societal level. Compassion, you will remember, is the desire to free others from suffering. And this is the response of God throughout the Old Testament to the suffering of his people, a response that was perfected, fulfilled, and completed in Jesus, whose heart was so often moved with pity by the spectacle of human suffering and who actively responded to human suffering by healings, miracles, and words of comfort.

But there is another compassion problem, one that is often leveled not so much against Christians, but against God, or against the idea of God, belief in God, the existence of God. And that problem is called the problem of evil or the problem of suffering. It goes like this: if God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, why is evil allowed to exist? Why does God not eliminate all suffering, all evil? Would this not be the compassionate thing to do?

This is, I will tell you now, an immensely difficult topic, and for many people, it is one of the greatest obstacles to belief. Though I will address it here, what I say in the space of a brief Sunday homily cannot possibly do justice to this matter.

But considering last Sunday's reflections on compassion, I make bold to address the issue, especially in light of what Jesus says in the first few lines of today's gospel – "*Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known*" (cf Mk 4:22; Lk 8:17; 1 Cor 4:5; Eph 3:9; Col 1:26). While the ways of God may appear to us mysterious now, one day what is concealed from our understanding will be revealed to us, one day knowledge of the mysteries of God will be made known to us in Christ (Col 2:2-3, Rom 16:25). One day... just not today. Which calls for patience, a word that means, coincidentally enough, "suffering."

Several times in the Old Testament, human presumption is rebuked for challenging God, for demanding of God an explanation for his ways, for trying to call God to account for not conforming to the expectations and demands of human righteousness and justice.

In the prophet Isaiah, for example, while comforting his people, God reminds them of the infinite distance between him as creator and them as created: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts*" (Is 55:8-9). There is much truth in this statement. Can an ant judge

human thoughts and ways? And yet there is a finite distance between ant and human, but an infinite distance between human and God. In a certain sense, we are closer to the ant than we are to God. Should it surprise us, then, that God's ways are beyond our ken? Truth, which alone makes us free, also calls for a great deal of humility, it seems.

The whole book of Job is an exploration of the problem of suffering. Job, a just and righteous man by all accounts, suffers outrageous loss of his fortune, his children, his health. Job and his friends debate and discuss whether Job is truly innocent or whether he deserves his immense suffering, whether or not God is right to allow Job to suffer so. Finally, God answers with a withering exposé of human ignorance, of our inability to fathom the ways and plans of God. *"Where were you when I founded the earth?"* God asks. *"Tell me, if you have understanding"* (Job 38:4). And for the next two chapters, God asks one rhetorical question after another that lay bare human ignorance and insignificance in the scope of the cosmos that God, and God alone created. In the end, as Job humbles himself before the Almighty, God restores to Job *"twice as much as he had before"* – property, animals, children, and health (Job lives another hundred forty years, years of blessing and prosperity) (Job 42:10-17).

A constant refrain in the Old Testament is this: who are we to demand an explanation of God? Since when does God seek out the counsel and opinion of mankind? (Job 15:8; Jer 23:18; Is 40:12-14;

Wis 9:13) Does the potter ask the clay what it should become? Does clay dare demand an explanation from the potter? (Is 29:16, 45:9; Jer 18:1-6). No, the knowledge of God's ways "*is too wonderful for me, far too lofty for me to reach*" (Ps 139:6).

And yet, because we are made in God's image and likeness, we use our intellect to seek out understanding, and not only of the natural world, but also of the mind of God. We want to know God and to understand God, his purposes for creation, his truth, his ways ... God made us for this. But again, his ways are far beyond our capacity to fathom. So what are we to do? What of this problem of evil, of suffering, of compassion? Will we forever be left in ignorance? Will there be no end to the suffering of not knowing the ways of God? Such ignorance is a source of great suffering.

Here is where Jesus, in whom are found and revealed all the wisdom of the mysteries of God, enters the scene, speaking words that are meant to answer these questions of ours: "*There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed.*" One day, yes, we will know; it will be given to us to understand. One day, but not today. In the meantime, we can perhaps find some measure of understanding and comfort in the example that Jesus himself gives of the sufferings of a woman in labor:

Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy. When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer

remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So you also are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. On that day you will not question me about anything (Jn 16:20-23).

St Paul, in his letter to Romans, makes a similar point: *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us”* (Rom 8:18). And in his second letter to the Corinthians: *“For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* (2 Cor 4:17-18).

In these passages, we are promised that our present suffering will give way to a future joy that will even make us forget our past suffering. Before eternity, the present moment is infinitesimally small. Yet, however small, the sufferings of the present moment are not beneath the notice of God, who in his compassion, wishes to free us forever from all our sufferings: *“Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”* (Mt 10:29-30; Lk 12:6-7).

God’s purpose in allowing suffering is mysterious, indeed. It seems to me that one of the difficulties that we face is a perhaps unspoken, unstated expectation. We expect, maybe even presume, that our lives and that life in general should be without suffering. Unaware of this tacit expectation, we then lash out against God for his supposed lack of compassion, for not making things otherwise. But,

I have to wonder, is this expectation even reasonable? Is there any foundation to justify such an expectation?

Human experience has always been one of suffering, to some degree or another. No human life has ever been free of suffering, not even the life of Mary, and certainly not the life of Jesus. It was precisely the compassion of God for human suffering that moved God to share in our condition. Out of compassion for human frailty, God chose to be born into our world of suffering, himself to suffer and by his suffering to free us forever from suffering and death.

It has never been the Christian understanding that God's purpose in creating the world was to construct a paradise free of all pain and filled with all pleasure, but rather a place of "soul-making" in which we have to grapple with the challenges of our existence in the world so as to become children of God and heirs of eternal life (Hick). Perhaps the struggle, perhaps suffering is somehow – and I use with word with great reserve and hesitation – "necessary" for us to become who we truly are meant to be: perfect as God is perfect, holy as God is holy, compassionate as God is compassionate.

Can suffering really be useful or even "necessary"? Consider how you might come across a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. Seeing the innocent creature struggling, suffering, you decide to help it and gently peel away the chrysalis so that the butterfly can emerge more easily. Hours later, you see the butterfly on the ground, its wings still shriveled. It never flies and soon dies. As it

turns out, the butterfly needs the struggle – it needs to suffer – in order to fill its wings with fluids so that they fully develop and deploy. Without such suffering, the butterfly cannot become what it is meant to be. But once it has taken flight, the sufferings of its past are as nothing compared to the beauty of its present.

The pregnant woman, the little sparrow, the butterfly. These images are meant to help us bear with dignity and resolve the sufferings of the present in anticipation of what is one day to be revealed. This is the virtue of hope. *“Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known.”* With these words the Lord Jesus promises us understanding and knowledge, one day, even if, for now, the purposes and plans of God must remain mysterious, hidden, inscrutable. One day, what is now concealed will be revealed. Just not today.

It seems fitting, then, to close our reflection with a passage from the end of the Book of Revelation, where John has a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, the former heaven and earth having passed away, giving way to the consummation of all creation according to the mind of God. In John’s vision, a voice cries out from the throne of God, announcing God’s final plan for the world: *“Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing, or pain, [for] the old order has passed*

*away*" (Rev 21:3-4). "*Behold,*" says God, "*I make all things new*" (Rev 21:5).

Until that day of final revelation, we must carry on somehow. Before the mystery of suffering, we can grow bitter and hard of heart, raising our fists to heaven in contempt of God, to reproach him, to blame him, to deny and curse him ... ignorant little ants that we are. Or else before the suffering we see in the world, we can strive to become like God – perfect, holy, compassionate. The choice is ours to make. As for me, I choose the way of compassion, to bear the sufferings of the present in hope of what is one day to be revealed in those who love God, who wait upon his word in hope (Ps 130:5).