

Second Sunday of Lent

Romans 5:1-11

Tribulation produces perseverance, the Apostle writes, and perseverance produces character. Many of us, I suspect, can easily and immediately relate to this; well, it might be easier for some than for others. No pain, no gain. Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. We have heard such statements, and expect to hear them, from high school coaches and fitness instructors and others who make their money making others miserable. Some of us may have grown up that way; if you went to talk to your parents about hurting about something, they would tell you that being hurt was good for you, and you should go and do chores instead of bothering them, and that was the comfort you had coming to you.

There is some truth to it, of course, that a person who grows up without being exposed to any kind of adversity will be poorly prepared for life as an adult. There is another side to it, also, though, namely that it is not necessarily true that whatever hurts you, but does not kill you, will only make you stronger.

I think that all who have bothered to notice will know of people who did not grow up to be strong even though they grew up hurting, and severely so, but grew up, instead, to still be hurting. Some were left frail, ever fearful and frightened, unable to expect anything other than the worst from anything or anybody, even from God. Others were left disfigured and disabled in heart and mind, incapable of compassion, indifferent to the plights and pains of others, oblivious to the emotional hurt they themselves inflict upon others, incapable of remorse and repentance, unable to receive the Word of God as anything other than a standard by which to hold *others* accountable, and judge others as wimps and weaklings.

When the Apostle writes as he does, that *tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character*, clearly it is not a such attitude of callousness and coldness of heart he intends to bring about in his readers.

What God teaches in Holy Scripture are not assorted words of wisdom, to begin with, from which we are to piece together each our own rules for how others should live and think and feel, or even for how we ourselves should; rather, it is, as the Apostle writes it elsewhere, *Christ as the power of God and the Wisdom of God, and what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him.*

What Holy Scripture teaches is the goodness of God, what He has done for us, what He gives to us, and how we are to live in His goodness, and have His goodness live in us, so as to live out His goodness in our life with others.

So obviously, what He would have His Apostle advocate, and Holy Scripture altogether, is not an attitude of loveless indifference toward others. He Himself is neither cold-hearted nor callous to the sufferings of His most beloved creatures; He is not, even though we, who are His most beloved creatures, give Him so little reason to care, and so much reason not to, with our sin, with the evil and ungodliness and impurity we have in our hearts and minds, and display in our lives.

For it is indeed true that we gravely offend God with all our sins and iniquities, and not just something we say in Church, and that we justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment. Sin is evil; and God is good, and holy, and whole and complete in His goodness. His goodness hates all that is evil, all ungodliness and impurity and unbelief. And we owe it to Him to obey Him in all things, because He is God, and we owe ourselves to Him, and to love Him above all things, and to seek His will before all things, and it is evil of us that we do not. But we do not; none of us does. For we cannot overcome that in ourselves which *will* not. If we are honest and in earnest about the things of God, not shallow and superficial, we will know. And it is evil of us that we fail; whatever any one of us sinners ever suffers in this world, well, it is all no more than what our sin deserves.

This is the judgement of God, as Holy Scripture declares it. This judgement is not His final Word, though; as we hear it today that He has had His holy Apostle write that *God shows His love toward us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Although, by each and all of our sins and iniquities, we greatly offend God, and justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment, and although all our suffering and sorrow in this life is no more than we have earned with God, His goodness has proven itself greater than all, namely in this: that the Son of God has suffered and died for us to save us from our sin, and from all suffering.

The Son of God left His heavenly home in glory behind to have Himself born into our kind. And He had Himself baptised with sinners to take our sin upon Himself, and bear it for us, and suffer His own judgement against it, so as to rescue us from the wrath of His own righteousness against all wrongdoing, and wrong, the hatred of His own holy goodness against evil.

Crucified and cursed and condemned He had His own judgement executed upon Himself against all sin, all ungodliness and unbelief and impurity in our lives, and in our hearts and minds. And so His judgement has been executed, the price and penalty paid, and we are righteous before His judgement, free from guilt and impurity. As the Apostle writes it, *while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*. We are no longer under His wrath, rather, the abundance of His love rests upon us, and rather than suffer endless death and dying in His judgement we shall live and be with Him for ever in the fullness of His glory.

This is the promise He has set His Church to preach and teach to sinners for Him, on His behalf, out of His own Word, which He has entrusted to His Church, in Holy Scripture. And it is a *promise*, yes, for His salvation is full and complete, and there is nothing lacking, nothing left for us sinners to do, and with His promise, the salvation He promises is given, really given, to all who hear His Word and surrender and submit to it in the obedience of faith, that is: in the obedience that *is* faith.

As the Apostle writes it, *having been justified by faith, made righteous before God, that is, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God*.

Only therefore, and only then, does it apply, what the Apostle writes, that *tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character*, only when, *having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God*. Not only does tribulation produce perseverance, then, and therefore, and perseverance character, the character perseverance produces also produces *hope*, as the Apostle writes it. For again, he writes not in common psychological categories. Not all tribulation produces perseverance; that tribulation does, though, which a Christian receives in the patience of faith, as from the goodness of God. It produces *perseverance*, as it makes the Christian to appreciate the promise of God, that this life of suffering and sorrow shall not last for ever, and that, as the Apostle will write it later in his Letter, *the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed upon us*. It makes the Christian to long for and look for the life of the world to come, which God promises to all who love Him, that is: to all who embrace His love and entrust themselves to His love.

And the sufferings and sorrows a Christian endures in this life leads him, also, to realise that the promise of God is, ultimately, all that he has.

And so his sufferings and sorrows produce the character of *faith* in the Christian. They make him to appreciate how utterly and entirely dependent he is upon the goodness of God, and to entrust Himself to God, and look to His Word alone. And the character of faith produces *hope* in him, as the Word of God assures him that he is right with God, and that, as such, not only will all ultimately be well, but all is well already, for God is God, and when you are right with Him, well, then all is well.

And this is hope that, as the Apostle writes it, *will not put us to shame*; for it is not our own, not of ourselves, nor of this world, rather, as the Apostle writes it, *the love of God has been poured out into our hearts with the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*. With His Word God pours His Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who hear, who is Himself, His own life, and His love, so that His own life lives in us, and His love, and so that we come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance to live with God instead. *Real* faith is not of ourselves, rather, it is God Himself alive in us, and His love.

Again, when the Apostle writes that *tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character*, he is not brushing off those who are hurting by telling them to just suck it up; he is not teaching in the categories of the world. Rather, he is calling Christians to look beyond our sufferings and sorrows, and look instead to the goodness of God, and live in His goodness, in the Word and worship of His salvation. For to live in the Word and worship of His salvation is what it means to be a Christian, and by living in the Word and worship of His salvation we are saved! As the Apostle writes it, *if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, so much more, now that we have been reconciled, shall we be saved by His life*. In the life of His Church, which is the Word and worship of His salvation, the Son of God comes to His Church and His Christians, and lives with us, and He not only *renews* His promise, but also actually *gives* to us anew, ever anew, the salvation He has already given to us once and for all, with His Spirit, in His Word, and with His body and blood, and makes Himself one with us, and us with Him, in all that is His. Having already now been *justified by His blood*, as the Apostle writes it, *we are saved through Him from the wrath*. How can we not, then, at all times, as the Apostle writes it, *rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received reconciliation?*

O Christ, our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us! *Amen*.