

FAITH IN SUFFERING

Dear sisters and brothers, as we come to the Eucharist, the Lord invites us to have a special relationship with the person of Jesus. He confronts us and questions us: Who is Jesus for you and for me? Let us, at this celebration of the Eucharist, truly encounter Jesus Christ in his word and in the sacrament, and pray that this encounter may transform our lives.

Dear sisters and brothers, last Thursday, I was travelling with another priest to Kalyan for the deanery meeting of priests. As I got into the train, one of the senior constables of the police station also came into the same compartment and sat in front of us. He had with him a big parcel of sweets and *farsan*, which he was taking home because he was going to celebrate the Ganesh festival. He recognised us, and we got into a conversation about the way people celebrate this festival and what it means. He said that he preferred a quieter celebration in his home, where he could pray, read the scriptures and share a meal with his family and friends. He said it was a more spiritual experience, which gave him a good feeling and also helped him live a better life. He then remarked about the big celebrations that are held all over the place, and he was a little critical about them, saying that they end up being social events. There is a lot of noise, the people in the processions are sometimes drunk, there is dancing to Bollywood music, large amounts of money are spent, and there could be corruption too. He did not see any religious element in these festivities. He said that he preferred celebrating the festival in a more devout manner that helped him to relate to God and to people.

After this conversation, I thought about the millions of people who celebrate all types of religious festivals. Behind these celebrations, there are different experiences, some more spiritually authentic than others. While there is something common to all festivals—a devotion to God and a festive fervour—the ways in which we celebrate are sometimes unhealthy. I thought that this constable's sharing was very important and it opened my eyes too. We often have the right beliefs, but what is our understanding of these beliefs?

In today's gospel, Jesus and his disciples were walking towards Caesarea Philippi, which was a group of towns or villages in a very fertile and verdant area. This area was named after the emperor Caesar, whom the people considered to be a god. Here, Jesus questions the faith of his disciples. He asks them, 'Who do people say I am?'. In a way, he is taking an opinion poll about himself and how he is perceived by the people. The disciples answered without any hesitation: Some say you are John the Baptist; some say you are Elijah or one of the great prophets. So, public opinion was that Jesus was someone very special – a prophet or a great religious personality.

Jesus goes on to the second question: 'Who do you say I am?' This question is a little difficult and more crucial. No one dares to answer, except Peter, who says, 'You are the Christ (the Messiah)'. 'Christ' means *Christos*, the Anointed One, the Saviour of the world. The people that awaited a great messiah for generations now see him in the person of Jesus Christ. Peter is able to recognise this, which is a very distinctive and brilliant response to Jesus' question. And Jesus agrees with Peter. Such a statement would be explosive in the time of Jesus – that he claims to be the Messiah, the long-awaited one.

Peter's answer was correct. He had the right 'labels' of religion. He came to that answer through the power of the Holy Spirit. But while he had the right label, he did not understand its implications, because immediately after this profession of faith, Jesus speaks about his suffering and death...and how does Peter react? He wants to stop Jesus from going through suffering: in a way, he wants to curtail the mission of

Jesus. He meant well, but Jesus rebukes him and calls him Satan – ‘Get behind me’. Peter’s lack of understanding was an obstruction in the mission of the Messiah.

So, while Peter had the right label, ‘Christos’, his understanding of Christ was insufficient, incomplete and faulty. Many people were awaiting the messiah in the time of Jesus. But they were awaiting a glorious messiah – one who would be a great political ruler, who would crush all their oppressors and be the most powerful king. But Jesus came as the suffering messiah, the suffering saviour. Peter too was unable to understand this.

My dear sisters and brothers, all of us who have gone through catechism classes and listened to homilies over the years have learnt the right labels in religion. If we are asked, ‘Who is the head of the Church?’, we answer, ‘Jesus Christ’. We have the Pope, bishops and priests, but Jesus is the head of the Church. We have the right answers, the right labels. If we are asked, ‘What do you go to church for every Sunday?’, we answer, ‘We go for Mass, the Eucharist’. But behind this answer, do we really have the correct understanding of the faith? Jesus corrects Peter and tells him that the Messiah must not only be the glorious king but also the suffering servant of God. And that completes and corrects Peter’s understanding.

Many of us also have good answers but not necessarily the right understanding of them. What is our experience of who Jesus is? For instance, we may like to relate to a Christ who is the provider: when we need something in life we go to him and he provides. We may like to go to a Christ who is like a balm, who gives us good feelings: if we are disturbed, upset or hurt, we go to him and he gives us healing and comfort. But, when it comes to sufferings, are we ready to affirm: ‘I believe in this Christ, who may sometimes demand from me suffering in life’?

For instance, can I say that I have a strong relationship with Jesus Christ if I spend hours in the church and before the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel, but in my home, there are broken relationships? Jesus tells us to mend those relationships. Mending broken relationships is a painful process. Sometimes, we are not the cause of the problem. Am I ready to go through that suffering in order to say, ‘Jesus is my Lord and Master’ – not as provider for me, not as balm in my life, but as one who may also demand from us suffering? – A suffering that comes with leading a life according to his commands: Love your neighbour. Live in harmony. It’s not easy; it is a cross. Yes it is suffering, sometimes, to love our neighbour; to love even a family member at times is suffering. Jesus says that suffering is part of your love for me.

Dear sisters and brothers, let us examine all our labels. Many of us go to Mount Mary’s and make a pilgrimage of walking from Bandra Station to the Mount. We buy candles and place them at the feet of Mary. We may buy flowers and offer them at the altar. Mary teaches us to live the Word of God so that Christ may be born in the world today. Let us not be satisfied with our Christian labels, but let us examine our understanding of the implications. There will be suffering. Are we ready to embrace Christ who may sometimes demand a cross? Let us pray that we may not only have the correct labels of religion but also the right understanding that can be very demanding, especially when it demands suffering from us, Amen.

As we say the Lord’s Prayer, let us pray to our Heavenly Father to help us purify our understanding of the faith, that we might not just profess our faith in words but truly live a genuine and authentic Christianity, even if it means suffering. We pray, Our Father...



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