

The reading from the Book of Job this morning draws our attention once again to the problem of human suffering, something we see plenty of whenever we watch the news on TV, or experience ourselves through job losses, the homeless in our streets, serious illness or natural disasters, -they are tragedies that can have a huge impact and that can leave people scarred for years to come, like the people who have been physically, psychologically or sexually abused, and live with the ongoing fear of it happening again.

Yet, while we empathise with people in these situations, it is also important for us to look at the attitude we adopt towards suffering, - towards these undesirable, but unavoidable events in life.

For example, most of our ancestors had a relatively high tolerance for suffering. Discomfort was a given in everyday life. Inconveniences, as we understand them, were so common that they weren't noticed as inconveniences. Life was short. Suffering was expected in this "vale of tears", - real happiness was promised only in our life hereafter.

But that is not our experience today. In the last few decades rapid advances in science and technology have created a different kind of world for us, along with a whole new range of expectations. We've developed an intolerance to any discomfort, much less to suffering. Conveniences like air-conditioning, instant communication and dial-up movies are taken for granted. Life expectancy, barring accidents, has ripened into grand old age, and happiness in this life is viewed as an inviolable birthright. Suffering is looked upon almost as an affront to human dignity and an insult to human progress. Pain relievers corner a billion dollar market in Australia alone, with promises of instant relief.

In general, this intolerant attitude towards suffering creates some notable repercussions or backlash. Because we find suffering so unacceptable, we're poorly prepared for the reversals of fortune that life always has in store. We're 'shocked' by accidents, and are likely to become severely depressed over setbacks and losses. When we look upon suffering as insufferable, ordinary problems and pains appear

catastrophic. If we can't find 'instant relief' for a cold or a headache, we feel perfectly entitled to remain miserable. All this, however, is the result of something that sages of all time have noted: "Suffering that is resisted becomes all the worse." Feeling we don't 'deserve' to suffer, sets us up for even more, and more intense suffering.

Since pain and suffering are so much part of everyone's life, is it unreasonable to conclude that that's the way it is supposed to be? No matter how we try to avoid it, some suffering is inescapable. It appears that the very nature of life, especially in its dynamics toward growth and evolution, guarantees that there will be suffering.

Just look at our make-up: we are at the same time divine and animal; immortal and bio-degradable, programmed for infinite possibilities, yet accommodated in a very finite organism, this body of ours. This means that sorrow, loss, setback, and pain, are just as natural as joy, achievement, success and pleasure. Which doesn't mean that we should look forward to suffering, or that we shouldn't do what is reasonable to alleviate it, but to deny suffering its right to exist, or constantly demanding 'instant relief' is unreasonable and self-defeating. To live is to suffer!

We saw in today's Gospel how Jesus healed suffering people, but he never cursed suffering itself. Suffering and pain is a necessary part of our nature that indicate that something is wrong and needs correction, something needs to be addressed and changed. So rather than complain about our suffering, or protest quite vainly "that this should not be happening to me (or to us)" we should look towards suffering for the lessons it is trying to offer. For depending on our outlook and our expectations, suffering can crush us or make us whole.

So, to finish on a positive note: Certainly look to relieve your pain, but not without first asking: "What am I meant to learn from this? Why am I undergoing this affliction? What has brought this on? What can this agony teach me?"

Suffering is relieved the more we understand its purpose, and with such an attitude on our part, suffering becomes a teacher rather than a curse.