

C Proper 28

14 November 2010 St Michael's Studio City

Luke 21.19 2 Thess 3.13 RCL

Endurance

In today's gospel reading we hear our Lord Jesus say: "By your endurance you will gain your souls." (Luke 21.19)

When I was ten years old, my father was killed in an accident. I remember each day being an endless well of emptiness, a hole in my gut that would not heal, a world that had suddenly gone grey and featureless, a life that seemed pointless and open to threat in a way that I had never imagined. It took the naivete of childhood to endure and get through that time. Paradoxically, childhood ended for me that year. Fifty-six years later I still miss our father, but the wound no longer hurts. That is one of the blessings of life and time.

When I was coming to the end of college, I had completed all graduation requirements by the end of the first quarter of my senior year. I could have graduated then and desperately wanted to. I was tired of school and with the foolishness of youth wanted to begin living in the real world. I was champing at the bit, as it were. Yet, if I finished out the fourth year, if I stayed two more quarters, I would earn enough credits to obtain a second degree. Such was my vanity that I gritted my teeth each day, endured what seemed endless boredom with classes, and stayed the course. I have two bachelor degrees, by sheer endurance, though I must admit the second doesn't seem as important as it did then. Maybe I am finally growing up.

When I was stationed in the Army in Vietnam, I counted down each day until I would return home – if I lived. Unlike our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan today, we had a definite, one-year tour of duty in combat. You knew the day you would go home, and we all had calendars on which we "X"ed out each day and took one more number off the count. Knowing definitely when we were going home helped keep us relatively sane; I don't know how modern soldiers endure the uncertainty they live with.

When my older brother was dying some eighteen years ago, I remember a terrible sadness watching him slip away day by day. He lived with me. The AIDS virus had lodged in his brain and the vital, funny, courageous hero of my youth was becoming a mere husk staring vacantly into empty space. Endurance seems a feeble word to describe the time.

These are just a few examples out of one man's mundane life, examples of simply living through what must be endured. We all have similar examples, for these sorts of things are common to human life. Some periods just have to be endured, just have to be lived through, one day at a time, as the saying goes.

I can look back and see that such endurance produced character, though I would have preferred to grow in less painful ways. I suppose we all would. Strength of soul, a toughness of

spirit, is part of what we mean by character. It is necessary to productive, satisfying adulthood. Those who don't learn to deny immediate wants in the service of a greater good in the future are condemned to the narrow confines of today, and often to a spiraling decline into want and unhappiness as a self-centered life, uncurbed by self-denial, becomes increasingly unsatisfying and dysfunctional.

There are rewards to creative endurance in human life. It is good for the soul to be denied its every wish. We learn that often what seemed so necessary is just not important in the long-term scheme of things. We learn that we can depend upon ourselves, as we depend also on the deeper and greater strength of the God who lives with us deep in the heart of our human reality. We learn that the well-being of others is an important constituent of our own happiness. We learn that the welfare of others may be more important to us than our own welfare.

I think that as a theologian I should have been more aware of the power and goodness of endurance earlier in my life. After all, we Christians see the example of our Lord Jesus living with daily frustration as he tried to teach His followers His conception of service and salvation through love and sacrifice. He was indeed the Messiah, the chosen One of God, but His idea of messiah was radically different from what His people expected. Thousands of years later His people still struggle with His teaching and His example. As His untimely death at the hands of the authorities drew closer, He must have endured great fear, as evidenced by His agonized prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Matthew 26.39; Mark 14.36; Luke 22.42) In spite of His dread, the Lord endured. And won the crown of life with God forever for Himself and for all of us. This is the Man whom we hear teach us in today's gospel reading: "By your endurance you will gain your souls." (Luke 21.19) He speaks from experience and He knows whereof He speaks.

One of Jesus' greatest followers, Saint Paul, lived a life of contradiction and endurance. In his powerful meditation on the meaning of belonging to Christ that we name the New Testament book of *Romans*, Paul has this to say, from his own experience: "...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,..." (Romans 5.3-5) Paul was no pollyana but rather a practical, down-to-earth executive. He mined his life and its sufferings in order to teach his followers the strength he had found in following the amazing Galilean Carpenter. We hear his wisdom repeated in today's reading from Second Thessalonians: Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. (2 Thess 3.13) Paul, as realistic about human life as Jesus Himself, looks at the inevitable suffering of life in a positive fashion, to show that anything in life can be used by God for our benefit. God does not want us to suffer, but in the world as we know it suffering is unavoidable. Ours is to see what God is doing, interpret it properly, and then accept and give thanks for it. (1 Thessalonians 5.18) God is always bringing resurrection out of death throughout our whole life long. It is ours to be Mary Magdalene in the Garden and perceive the new life.

So, here we are, in November, 2010. What can these ancient lives and these ancient texts do for us now? For myself, I take these lessons:

- + that even the greatest among us suffer contradiction and frustration in life,
- + that these experiences need not be negative but can be enormously productive in our growth as human beings and as Christians,
- + that I need not seek out suffering but I do need to use suffering in a positive way,
- + that I must be patient, for the present time is only part of the reality that also holds my future,
- + that God cares passionately about me and about how I deal with the life of the soul and body with which He has gifted me in this universe of space and time.

I take the Lord at His word: "By your endurance you will gain your soul." It is enough. I am satisfied.