

22nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

I have no time for a Church that unfeelingly tells people how to live their lives. But that also provides a problem for me. Whenever I stand here on Saturday night or Sunday morning I am very aware that most folk here have totally different life experiences to myself – by comparison I know nothing about parenting, I know little about the ethical difficulties people face in the workplace, I know nothing about what it is to have a chronic or serious illness. Who am I to tell people how they should deal with real or perceived difficulties in life? Really, all I can do is to share my own reflection on, my struggle with and my understanding of the Word of God – and make sure that I never say anything that I don't believe !

Caron Keating suffered with cancer for seven years before she died. A young, vivacious Northern Irish woman, a television and radio presenter in the United Kingdom, celebrity daughter of an equally famous celebrity mother – Gloria Hunniford – Caron was a well known face on British television. In a tender and touching programme, made after her death, Caron's family told the story of her ordeal and of her struggle to live. In all her sorrows, Caron's deepest sadness was the thought of leaving her two young sons.

In the final year of her life, while in Australia, Caron came in contact with a group of Buddhist monks. One of these monks noticed Caron's interior struggle and asked to speak with her. "I have been a spiritual man for many years," the monk said to her, "but I, too, am now ill. Caron, understand. You have not been singled out."

These words entered Caron's soul, and from that time onwards, she became more serene. After all her struggling, a spirit of acceptance came to her. She would continue her fight to survive, she would keep her will to live, but now there was the added gift of peace, an ability to accept whatever the future would bring. When the end came, Caron died a peaceful death, surrounded by her loving family.

Our encounter with suffering is a spiritual journey. It involves a struggle. It takes us through dark places. It can involve protest and rebellion, fight and flight. But in the end there comes acceptance. What cannot be avoided must be endured. But this "yielding" of ourselves is not an admission of defeat. It is giving ourselves into the

arms of God. It is not an easy journey to make nor an easy thing to achieve.

When Jesus begins to talk in terms of personal suffering, when he begins to intimate to his friends the dreadful ordeal that lies ahead of him, his great friend, Peter, will have none of it. The very thought of Jesus being persecuted or assaulted in any way is enough to make Peter recoil in horror, and to rebel against the prospect. "Heaven preserve you from such a thing," he says to Jesus.

In reply, Jesus sounds very harsh. "Get behind me, Satan." But, perhaps, Jesus was struggling to accept the idea himself. Perhaps he was simply saying "Leave me alone!" It would be a great temptation to sneak away, to make plans to avoid the coming scenario. How easy, how alluring that prospect would be. But Jesus has to make a decision. Peter's way of thinking is a natural and human way of reacting to evil and suffering. We would probably all say what Peter said. But there is another way of thinking. Jesus points out to us the way that God thinks about things, and God's way is quite different from ours.

Now here comes the lesson. In our lives in this world, we naturally seek to save ourselves, to look after ourselves, even to prosper. This, Jesus tells us, is a narrow, limited and short-sighted way of living. Jesus will show us, in his own life, and in his way of facing life-and-death issues, that there is another and a better way of living. To live for one another, and not for ourselves.

If you learn to "lose your life", then you will find life. This is a completely new way of thinking. It is a new mind, a new mentality, as St. Paul explains to the Christian people of Rome. A commentator on Paul, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has written, "Prior to Christ it was taken for granted that the primary goals of human existence should be survival, comfort and success," But Jesus died so that we might live, no longer for ourselves but for him, and for love of one another.

This new way of thinking, this new way of behaving in the face of suffering and hostility, becomes the major education of Christ's friends. Peter, in particular, learned the lesson profoundly. In his later life he came to write to his fellow Christians, "No one can hurt you if you are determined to do only what is right; if you have to suffer for being good, you will count it a blessing."

As Jesus went willingly to the cross, accepting the suffering that his enemies inflicted on him, we, as Christ's followers, are invited to do the same. To bear our sufferings patiently, and to persevere in love.