

Ordinary inconveniences can upset us mightily: a tear in our clothes, a co-worker's abrasive laughter, other drivers on any street in town, or a clogged drain. Often what should remain a nuisance mushrooms into a cloud of injustice for us. So spilled orange juice in the morning becomes the reason for screaming at someone else during the day.

Most of us think we know suffering, but few of us do. We came to church tonight because we had transportation, money to buy clothes, and the opportunity to pursue a love for the arts. But there are people without homes, without jobs, without good health, and without plain simple luck. Life hands them an empty plate. That suffering forms the subject for this evening's first reading, which asks, what do we make of people with chronic pains or terminal diseases, victims of abuse, rape, and harrassment? Most poignantly, what do we make of those who die young?

Wags in the centuries before Christ drew a simplistic conclusion: those who suffer get what they deserve; suffering results from sin. We can still hear that opinion today among the self-righteous who sniff that AIDS is God's punishment, or that rape victims ask for it. The Book of Wisdom challenged that view, because it seemed to the author that too often good people suffer while evil people elude adversity. Wisdom explains suffering not as punishment, but as purification. Since all sin, the author believes suffering purifies the good in this life, whereas the evil will suffer in eternity.

Suffering remains a mystery. It seems unfair for God to permit it. It certainly is not punishment, but even to call it "purification" sounds like punishment by another name. As they say, "If it walks like a duck. . . ." Suffering is not the result of a poor spiritual life; rather, it can be the cause of a deeper spiritual life. Suffering alone can offer the anguished a meditation on God's mercy. Just as the indigent can know God's wealth, and the celibate can know God's love, so the suffering can know God's mercy in ways far removed from the rest of us--just as the dead can know God's life.

Weep not for those who die young or suffer long; in their poverty they become rich by the mercy of Jesus Christ.