

5th Sunday of Lent

Saint Patrick grew up in Britain, but pirates kidnapped him at the age of 16 and brought him to their homeland, Ireland. They forced Patrick into labor as a shepherd. Six years later he escaped, fled back to Britain, and was ordained a priest. Then he returned to Ireland as a different kind of shepherd—not to seek revenge for his suffering, but to convert its people to Christ.

Suffering at the hands of others produces lasting consequences, often damaging ones. It seems so contrary to life's purpose and beauty that people who experience such torment or watch others experience it sometimes question the very existence of God who created this beautiful world.

When suffering results from the acts of sinful perpetrators, the classic question people pose goes something like this: "If God is good, and God is all powerful, then why is there evil?" It seems that a good God would use his power to eliminate it. The classic answer to the question is, "Yes, but, apparently God placed a higher value on free will." If we could never choose to do evil, then we could never choose to do good. Choosing good, as St. Patrick did, is such a wonderful value that God gave us that ability. It makes the world more beautiful.

The Letter to the Hebrews poses another reason for suffering: It teaches obedience. In today's verses the author describes the sufferings of Christ. The portrait is one we've imagined many times whenever we behold a crucifix: "In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death." We'll hear the painful testimony about Jesus' crucifixion in the Passion according to Mark next Sunday. We can almost hear the "loud cries" of Jesus on the cross; we can almost see the "tears" he shed from physical pain.

Jesus also suffered the emotional pain of watching his friends run away as his enemies apprehended him, ridiculed him, tortured him, and killed him. Yet, the Letter to the Hebrews says, when Jesus offered these prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to his Father, "he was heard because of his reverence." If all we see is the cross, it doesn't seem as though Jesus was heard. But he was. He was saved from death—not saved from experiencing it, but saved from its control. He rose. The Letter says of the risen Jesus, "when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered." If we learn to obey, he will save us. Suffering teaches us the strengths and weaknesses of being human. We are not indestructible. Our illnesses, our sins, our sufferings at the hands of others teach that we are not in control. Death will sharpen that point. We cannot learn enough to escape death, but we can learn enough to accept it.

Patrick's faith was stronger than his suffering. He used his suffering to increase the faith of others. No one wants suffering, but we can learn from it. Lent reminds us of our weaknesses, but it also builds our strength. The Father heard Jesus because of his Son's reverence. As we practice reverence, God will hear us. He will save from death all those who obey his Son. Our suffering may lead others to faith—even those who caused our pain.