

St Mary's Dorchester, Sunday 30th August, i.e. 13th after Trinity. This Sunday was one of our regular Healing services.

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Romans 12:9-end
Matthew 16:21-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of you who've been coming here for a while will know that I like word-play, a pun or a double-meaning. Sometimes that's fun, but sometimes the English language is unhelpful – it forces us to do a bit of extra work. One example that comes up regularly for me is the word “patient”.

Patients are one of three groups of people who I work with at the hospital; the other two are staff and visitors. The patients are the reason why the staff and the visitors are there, they're the reason for the hospital in the first place. A patient is someone who receives medical care; it comes from an old Latin word meaning “one who suffers”. So far so good.

But modern English uses the word in other ways too. “Patient” is an adjective: it's a character trait; it means the willingness to endure hardship, to wait, to defer gratification. Along with the adjective we get a noun, “patience”, which is a virtue, a good habit that we can work on and get better at – or not.

Generally it's pretty clear from context whether we're talking about a person or a character trait. But, as I've said, the double-meaning forces us to do a bit of extra work. As a description of the people I work with, the adjective “patient” is often inappropriate. In fairness, most patients in hospital endure their treatment with resignation, and very occasionally, cheerfulness; but many patients struggle to be patient, and a small but vocal minority actively protest. I'll let you guess who gets called on when they do that.

I'm being a little melodramatic. Most of the people I visit in hospital each week are excellent company, and some of them are inspiring. But there are lots of unhappy people too; that's unavoidable. I reflect that there is little in life that prepares us for an extended illness except illness; we are all learners when it comes to suffering. I meet some people – even elderly people – who tell me that it's their first time in hospital. Being a patient – being passive – is especially hard if you've spent decades cultivating a habit of sturdy independence, and being praised for it, as our culture often does. That creates a problem for us when we suffer, and it creates a problem for those who are called to care. I'd like to talk about that for a few minutes.

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If there's a common thread in our Bible readings today, it's something about the reality of suffering. Because of the way the prophet speaks, the name Jeremiah is – or at least used to be – a byword for lament. He gives us a really good sample in today's Old Testament reading:

Why is my pain unceasing, [he says,] my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? [Jeremiah 15:18]

I notice that Jeremiah is unsqueamish when it comes to blaming God for human suffering. He has that in common with many other biblical authors, and Christians down the ages. Part of me wants to resist that, because I believe that God is love, and therefore God does not want to hurt us. But there is a logic to the prayer of lament that doesn't go away.

I do believe that, at the end of the day, God's priorities are not my natural priorities. What better example of that difference is there than the story of Jesus. Though Jesus shared so much in common with us, he was also uniquely in tune with God's will. It's in that spirit that he says, of himself

...the Son of Man must...undergo great suffering...and be killed... [Matthew 16:21]

And of us he says:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. [Matthew 16:24-25]

As I say, God's priorities are not our *natural* priorities. Our *natural* priority is, in almost every situation, to do whatever we can to avoid suffering. When it's inevitable that we suffer for some natural good nature usually sweetens that with some other natural good – maybe an instinct which temporarily overwhelms our reason; or perhaps just forgetfulness, as John's Gospel says in one place [John 16:21]. But in order to tolerate suffering beyond our natural limits it takes something unnatural, or supernatural. It takes something like religion.

And that brings us to our other reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans. There's a lot in this passage

that seems unnatural, or supernatural. Most dramatically Paul echoes what Jesus teaches in the sermon on the mount about the love of enemies. But more in keeping with my theme this morning, he also says that we should

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, [and] persevere in prayer. [Romans 12:12]

These choices, these virtues, show the same kind of self-forgetfulness that Jesus wants his followers to show. And patience is there in the middle: the willingness to endure suffering and to wait.

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When I was talking a few minutes ago about the patients I see, I said that we're all learners when it comes to suffering. Noticing that, I wondered if there was any way to kick-start that process, to learn patience in advance. So I found this classic text by Bishop Jeremy Taylor [1613-1667]. It's called *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. I'd like to finish with a few insights I've gleaned from it.

The first thing to say is that, when it comes to learning patience, it's worth doing the groundwork now. One of the tools Jeremy Taylor recommends is to keep a running record in your own mind of the things that really comfort you, "things as are apt to charm thy spirit and ease thy fancy", as he says [p. 405]. This isn't just about distracting yourself with pleasant memories. He's thinking of the things that really motivate you to be your best self: it might be an experience of awe, something that made you feel very small and yet very special; it might be words of praise you've received from someone you admire; it might be a passage of Scripture that always brings a tear to your eye... These memories enjoy a direct line to our hearts, they have a power to affect us more than any argument from a doctor or a priest or a family member; and if we've chosen to remember the right things, those memories will retain their power even when we are weak. So keep a record of them; rehearse them to yourself so that you always have them close to hand. And start doing it immediately! The time to start practising patience isn't when you're already sick – the time to start is now.

The second thing I've picked up is about acceptance. Most people treat suffering as an anomaly, or an accident. It isn't an anomaly: it's a normal part of life. Jeremy Taylor says that we should face that reality directly. However good our medicine gets we don't have a choice about whether we suffer or not; but we do have a choice how we face that suffering. This is where patience is related to courage. Faced with the knowledge of the reality of suffering, Taylor says,

set [your] heart firm upon this resolution: “I must bear it inevitably, and I will, by God’s grace, do it nobly.” [p. 404]

Making that resolution makes a big difference.

The final thing I’d like to share is a prayer. The text of it will be published with my sermon on the Benefice website – please do have a look, and use it if it speaks to you.

Let’s pray.

Most merciful and gracious Father, who, in the redemption of lost mankind by the passion of thy most holy Son, hast established a covenant of sufferings. I bless and magnify thy name that thou hast adopted me into the inheritance of sons, and hast given me a portion of my elder Brother. Lord, the cross falls heavy and sits uneasy upon my shoulders; my spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak; I humbly beg of thee that I may now rejoice in this thy dispensation and effect of providence... I rejoice, O Lord, in thy rare and mysterious mercy, who by sufferings hast turned our misery into advantages unspeakable: for so thou makest us like to thy Son, and givest us a gift that the angels never did receive: for they cannot die in conformity to, and imitation of, their Lord and ours: but, blessed be thy name, we can; and, dearest Lord, let it be so. Amen. [p. 415]