

## 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

A French Catholic woman, Elisabeth, met a young doctor, Felix, and they were married. She was relatively devoted, hence her decision to marry a Catholic man from a Catholic family. It was quite a shock to her to find that her husband had renounced the faith and was an editor and contributor to an anti-clerical and anti-Church newspaper and magazines. The climate of her time was anti-clerical, especially among her social class. Her husband's attack on the faith did not push her away from the faith but rather caused her to study it and led to a deep conversion in her life when she was in her thirties. From that time on, she saw her major work in life would be the conversion of her husband. She worked hard to help the poor and kept up quite a spiritual life, giving spiritual counsel to many. Elisabeth and Felix were not able to conceive children in their marriage. She bore patiently the attacks of her husband on her faith and grew in holiness of life. In her forties, Elisabeth was diagnosed with cancer, which she eventually succumbed to and died. Her husband received a letter from her after her death where she prophesied that he would convert and become a priest. This prophecy enraged him and he quickly headed off to Lourdes to attack the miracles there and prove them all false. This led to his conversion and his becoming a priest. The man and woman's names were Elisabeth and Felix Leseur.

In the Gospel today we hear our Lord saying, "I have come to bring a fire and a sword," that following Him will bring about battle and wars, even with those closest to you. Those who should be our closest helpmates are often those who will cause us the most suffering in our lives. In the First Reading Jeremiah the prophet is persecuted by the very people he was called to save.

Suffering is such a part of our Christian lives and yet we have tried to remove it. A Christianity without suffering is a Christianity without Christ and without love. The good news is we do not have to go look for it - those closest to us will bring us plenty and we have to thank them for it. Because they are going to help us on our journey to Heaven and, if we are wise, we can use it, like Elisabeth, to help them. How do we know that suffering will be part of our journey to Heaven? Because our Saviour said, "Take up your cross and follow me. I suffer because I love you. I suffered so you can be here." I find it disconcerting that in all the catechism I went through and Catholic schools I attended (though I admit they are better now) we were not taught about suffering. We were given images of the nice surfer Jesus. Not that Jesus isn't nice and amazing, only that we didn't meet the Jesus who suffered.

It seems that we made a switch from listening to the Scriptures and saints who are in Heaven to receiving teaching from those had only heard about Jesus and read about Him but never had a relationship with Him. They tried to make Jesus appealing and, in the process, seemed to divorce Him from the one thing that we needed and that is a passionate Jesus who loves us in His passion. The passion of Jesus shows us that love and without it we are at a loss to know what love really looks like. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, like Elisabeth and Felix, who discovered how much Jesus loved them and were willing to trade everything for it. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who suffered and found it sweet. Once we

meet our Lord, everything makes sense, even suffering. The world makes no sense without the idea of redemptive suffering, loving suffering.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Because God can make good come out of bad. Can you imagine St John of the Cross praying each day to suffer because he wanted a part in Christ? He wanted to passionately love as well. Or Padre Pio saying when his stigma healed over, "I won't live much longer because I don't suffer anymore." It seems to go against our grain to embrace suffering yet every saint would say it is our way to make serious spiritual profit. I know when you enter this road of holiness you will most times start in fear because the devil hates this road and starts by lying that it will be too much for us. But that is because we don't know God, who is not like that. He will make our suffering sweeter than our joys because they are powerful. Do you know that Jesus' suffering won our salvation and that when we unite our sufferings to Christ they have the same power? All we have to say is, "Jesus, I offer you this suffering in union with your suffering for this."

Good news this powerful way to pray is so available to us. As the readings say, our loved ones will bring them to us when they are thoughtless or at times mean, perhaps even attack our faith. You can say, "Thank you, Jesus, for this powerful prayer. I unite it to your suffering and I offer it up for so and so," or give it to Jesus or Mary to do what they think is best. It can be small things, like a sore knee or ache that we have. It can be depression that you fight. Heart ache for not being able to do what you want. Everyone suffers as a Christian and we can profit immensely from them. This is part of the battle that Jesus reminds us of. We can complain or make great profit. There are many souls who need salvation. And God is relying on us to participate in their salvation through uniting our suffering to His. There is a beautiful story of St Therese when she was a little girl. She heard about a notorious criminal who was unrepentant. He would swear at the priest and refused Confession. St Therese started praying and offering up her little sufferings for him in great love. She asked for a sign of his conversion before he was executed. And, in the newspaper, she read that in the moment before he died he asked to see a priest and kissed his cross. Love is a battle and Heaven is fought for. The prize is great, the victory available if we but use what our Lord offers us - that is our sufferings.