

“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – this is my gospel for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal.”

It was a Sunday morning in a small chapel on the borders of Venezuela and Colombia. As Mass was beginning, the doors burst open and a band of guerillas armed with machine guns rushed in. There was a stunned silence, and a wave of fear went through the congregation. The priest was bundled outside and there was the sound of machine gun fire.

The leader of the guerillas came back into the building and demanded that anyone who believed in Jesus and the cross should stand up. No one moved. Finally, one man stood up and said simply: “I believe in Jesus.” He was ordered roughly outside. Then a number of others stood up, and they too were ordered outside. There was again the sound of machine gun fire.

When there were no more willing to testify to Jesus, the guerilla leader ordered the remaining members of the congregation out of the chapel. “You have no right to be here,” he told them. When they were outside, they were amazed to see their priest and those who had testified alive and well. These were ordered back into the chapel to continue the service. The rest were ordered to stay away “Until you have the courage to stand up for your beliefs.” With that, the guerillas slipped back into the jungle.

How would you re-act if something similar occurred when you were present? Not such a remote possibility in today's world. The shooting in the Paris theatre, the slaying of 20 + people in that Florida night club, and other such terrifying events and the threat of violence give us all pause for thought. I don't suppose that any of us know how we'd behave until it happened. We may not be asked to testify to our faith, but would we just

look after our own skins, or seek to help others? Until such a time, all we can do is to strengthen our faith and to use life's experiences to deepen our understanding of how to live it.

A young man was appointed to the presidency of his bank at the age of 32. He was both elated and frightened by the responsibility. He decided to go and see the venerable chairman and to ask for his advice. "What is the most important thing for me to do as president?" he asked him. "Make the right decisions," came the reply. The young man thought this over for a moment or two, then asked: "Thank you. But how do I make the right decisions?" The old man replied: "Experience." The young man was beginning to get exasperated. "But, Sir, that's why I'm here. I don't have the experience. How do I get that?" "Wrong decisions," said the old man. We have to learn from all life's experiences, and not least our failures. [It's probably true to say that we learn far more from our failures than we do from our successes.] We should not forget the lives of the saints who can tell us so much about the struggle of faith in adversity.

How would we cope if, coming to the end of our lives, we had to face what St Paul faced? He was in prison and facing a number of failures. The Church in Galicia had gone off the rails and succumbed to the Judaisers, who insisted that Gentile Christians should keep the ritual Law. His plans to go to Spain had been thwarted. And a number of his supporters had abandoned him.

What strengthened and supported Paul was that he had grasped the reality which lay behind the death and resurrection of Jesus. We know that many had fallen away when Jesus had been crucified, bringing to an end their hope that he was indeed the Messiah.

We also know that there were many who had the spiritual insight to understand the nature of his Messiahship – nothing less than the restoring of the relationship between God and humanity. It had nothing directly to do with political power, which was the Jewish

expectation. Like Jesus, Paul knew that his path would not be easy, but he firmly believed that it would end in triumph.

It is by learning to endure the suffering which cannot be avoided, by seeking to focus on God and not on ourselves, that we shall find the strength to endure, and, like Paul, rise above it. As Dr Ian Paul has written: "When the going gets tough, what matters is not that we have grasped God, but that God has grasped us, and that he is faithful."

We don't know how we would react to circumstances similar to St Paul's. All we can do is seek to live daily close to God and to strengthen our spiritual life through our prayers and worship, and the support of each other – and relying on God's promises which are always true, unlike ours, which, as Paul says often "do no good but only ruins those who are listening."

There is a great misunderstanding here about the way in which God interacts with his creation. As Lionel Blue wrote: "According to grandma, if you prayed hard enough for something holy, it would happen. Well, it didn't." He goes on: "I am a post-Holocaust Jew, painfully aware of the wagonloads of human misery on their way to the camps and the gas chambers. How many prayers must have been said or sobbed in them which were never answered in a way which mad sense to those who prayed them?" Our experience shows us that God seldom interferes directly in human affairs – that is the cost of our freedom and his love. But he does arm us if we focus on his and not on ourselves.

Betsie Ten Boom who dies in Ravensbruck concentration camp refused to hate her guards who beat her, eventually causing her death. Her dying words were: "We must tell the people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still."

Victor Frankl spent three years in four different concentration camps, including Auschwitz. His suffering was appalling, but his spirit was never broken. He wrote later:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

And there are always choices to be made. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make decisions, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstances, renouncing freedom and dignity to become moulded into the form of the typical inmate.

Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it became clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually. It is his spiritual freedom which cannot be taken away, that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. The way a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances to add a deeper meaning to his life.

