

At first hearing, today's readings could make us very despondent. Jesus certainly didn't hold anything back from his disciples. He made it very clear that there would be great difficulties ahead. When he spoke about the world, he was very realistic. He spoke about wars and revolutions, earthquakes, plagues and famines, persecution, imprisonment, betrayal, hatred and killings. All these things, sadly, we are still familiar with today.

These tragedies and disasters and our own personal sorrows and worries could easily lead us to despair.

This past week, I have thought about this a lot.

This Sunday is Remembrance Sunday, when we remember all those who have died during wars and conflict. We recently celebrated All Souls Day when we remember our departed brothers and sisters. Last weekend, a good friend asked me to visit his dad who was very ill, and on Tuesday my family and I interned the remains of our dear mom at Oscott Cemetery in Birmingham.

We can sometimes ask "why does God allow this suffering?" We can sometimes find it hard to see God's hand in our lives.

Today's readings have reminded me of something that happened several years ago. When I was a nurse specialising in caring for those living with dementia, I was asked to give a teaching session to a group of nurses who were attending a six day "care of the dying" course. I was asked to talk on how we can better communicate and care for those who are living with dementia.

At the end of the talk, one of the nurses said that it must be hard to work with these patients, seeing their suffering and the suffering of their loved ones. He went on to say that he thought the illness destroyed the person and left only a shell.

I had to tell him - I couldn't disagree with him more.

These people, who some in society would have us believe, are worthless and would be better off dead, have taught me so much about God's love and how it can be found even in suffering. To illustrate this, I told the group about a lady I had nursed for several years when I first qualified.

In her final months she was bed-ridden, contracted with arthritis and cancer had spread through her body. I can vividly recall the consultant psychiatrist reviewing this lady.

When I told him that she was blind, that she was deaf and unable to speak, that she was unable to do anything for herself, he stopped writing in her notes and put down his pen. He thought for a moment and then just said "This woman has no quality of life at all."

What I think he meant but didn't say in so many words was - her life was not worth living...and she would be better off dead.

But he had not seen what I had seen.

He had not seen this lady's husband (who was also elderly and frail) who could only visit her every few weeks.

He had not seen him struggle to walk down the long hospital corridor to see her.

He had not seen him sit by her bed and kiss her.

He had not seen him stroke her head and hold her by the hand.

He had not seen him telling her all the family news and what had been happening in the village.

He had not seen him tell her how much he loved her and missed having her at home

And he had not seen and heard her gently start to hum and rock as she realised that she was loved.

That consultant didn't see what I see clearly now - that this couples love for each other provided a perfect example of Jesus' words today - that in our trials, suffering and pain; that is our "opportunity to bear witness."

That consultant had not seen the enormous effect this couples witness of pure unconditional love had on all who saw it. Far from being an empty shell, this lady was a precious life. A precious wife, mother, grandmother - who received love and also gave love. It was a reflection of the love God has for us all. A reflection of his unconditional love for us that is beyond our comprehension.

The greatest trials and suffering most of us experience is the death of a loved one and this is particularly in our thoughts at this time of year.

As I said earlier, my good friend's dad was very poorly and last Saturday it was my privilege to sit and pray with him for an hour or so. He talked about how much he loved his family and how he knew they loved him. He wouldn't have described himself as "religious" but it was clear to me that he had a deep faith and love of God. He knew he was dying but was completely at peace.

It made me reflect that (after 25 years of nursing and 12 years as a hospice chaplain) I have seen first-hand how, for those with no belief in God, death can be a truly shattering blow. It can become a cruel and empty experience.

But our faith is based on the resurrection. For us, death is not the end but the beginning. The pain we feel and the grief we experience is still very real and at times,

overwhelming...but so is the love of God. It is at these times we need to turn to him and place all our trust in him.

Jesus tells us time and time again in the Gospel "do not be afraid". He asks us to persevere, not to lose heart and we need to keep in mind the wonderful promise at the end of Matthews Gospel "And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."

And we are not alone.

Jesus gives us the miracle of the Eucharist, where heaven really does touch earth. The Eucharist is a sacrifice and we are also called to offer ourselves, our sorrows and pain, our worries and sufferings. We are present at Calvary; we join in the one sacrifice that Christ performed when he was both priest and victim.

As followers of Christ we are called to love, and we can not truly love without experiencing pain. As mother Teresa used to say, we need to "love until it hurts."

Jesus does not spare us pain - but he does rescue us from despair.

My friend's dad died peacefully on Wednesday morning with his family around him, knowing that he was loved by them and by God.

His family are obviously in the early rawness of grief, as are my family following the death our mom; but I hope we take great comfort from the beautiful line from our first reading today "...the sun of righteousness will shine out with healing in its rays."

When we are suffering and full of doubts we need to trust (and really believe) these words. We need to allow the God of love to comfort and heal us.

At my mom's funeral I read a reflection on a passage from the book of Revelations and I have read it recently in a past homily but I'd like to finish with it again today.

"Read Revelations 21:1-4. Then try to imagine what it will be like to enter heaven. The beauty is breathtaking. You are surrounded by the loving presence of God. You see members of your family and your closest friends walking towards you. The last time you saw them alive, they were worn with age and illness; now they are alive and so beautiful that you are almost overwhelmed. You embrace and talk and laugh. Suddenly the realisation fills your whole being: "we will never again be parted. There is nothing to fear, nothing to be anxious about. No more sadness, no more hatred, no more sickness, no more tears, no more death. This is what I've always wanted; this is what I was made for."

Ask Jesus to help you keep this always in mind. Talk to your favourite saints and to friends and family who have died. Ask them to stay close to you, watch over you, and help you to live in such a way that one day you will join them in heaven.