

Bishop's Reflection – 19th Sunday

Death is hard enough to deal with in the best of circumstances. But when it involves the death of a child, there are many other dynamics at play. Including misplaced blame and guilt and this oft-used bargain: "Do not take my child's life, but my life instead. I have had the joy of living; my child's life has hardly begun."

This became my mother's prayer in June of 2010, when both she and her great-grandson were admitted to hospital for totally separate reasons. "Spare him an almost certain death," she prayed again and again. "Take me instead."

Now listen to St. Paul's letter to the Romans once again, as he makes a similar plea, not for the physical lives of his own people, but their eternal lives with God. "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh."

To offer his own eternal soul to damnation for the sake of those he loves, imagine the consequences and the sacrifice that is being made. But that is the extent of St. Paul's pastoral zeal as he seeks to unify his people to the work of God. An all-consuming zeal that pushes the boundaries of human love.

I have seen a similar zeal among many parents and grandparents, as they desire the spiritual conversion of their children and grandchildren. A zeal that is so powerful that it can do great good or great harm, depending on its application.

Great good, in so far as there are no limits placed on prayers, personal sacrifices and signs of true affection lavished on the person in question. A love that is rooted in Christ, careful not to uproot the wheat with the weeds in the other person's life, showing the utmost patience under trial.

Great harm, in so far as we take the place of God in judgment or in wanting to bring about conversion in acts and words of desperation. Here our zeal needs tempering, lest we do more harm than good. Lest we fail in our love and affection, by giving way to impatience and frustration.

This is not to deny our feelings of impatience and frustration. These are sure to come. Here, Elijah is a clear example. He's so tired of trying and meeting with failure that he has asked God to take his life. Frustration has spilled into rejection and isolation. He has lost the very purpose of his life.

An angel has been sent to bring relief. He instructs Elijah to eat, and then to eat again. Food to strengthen him for the journey and water to quench his thirst. By the power of this intervention, Elijah is able to make the forty-day journey to the mountain of the Lord. Once there, he enters into the presence of God, in the power of sheer silence.

How many times do we not have to make that journey ourselves? How many times in our impatience and frustration do we not have to be carried by the Lord and brought into His presence by the power of prayer? It is not always easy, being sent out as a prophet; but rooted in God and in the purified love of our neighbour, we will find our hope and our strength.