

SUFFERING – CHRIST’S EXAMPLE

As the drama of the gospel narrative unfolds, the cross of Christ is revealed as the turning point in history; the birthing of a new age; the coming of the Kingdom of God into the world – ‘The hour has come’. In his time, Jesus moves towards the climax of his ministry on earth. Christ’s sufferings were intricately related with his identity as the Messiah, and the world’s reaction to him.

In essence, Christ’s sufferings were unique, because he is unique – ‘God the One and Only’ (John 1:18). Thus, we need to be careful not to over-generalise from his experience by trying to force it into a ward context. For example, we are not the Messiah, and our death would not bring the possibility of salvation for our patients! However, as Jesus prepares his disciples for his imminent death and departure, he begins to describe the profound link between his own fate and that of his disciples.

John 15 forms part of Jesus’ farewell to his disciples. There is a real sense of intimacy in this final major teaching section in John’s Gospel. Jesus emphasises his desire that the disciples ‘bear fruit’ (4, 5, 8, 16). He commands them to have a deep, genuine love for one another, with the implication of suffering and sacrifice (12-13). He refers to the need for obedience and for remaining in his love. However, the primary focus is that of the disciples’ mission. They are to continue Jesus’ task in his absence, and the purpose of ‘bearing fruit’ is the Father’s glory (8). The prerequisites to the success of this mission are pruning by the Father; remaining in Jesus/obedience, prayer and a committed love.

Jesus then proceeds to warn his disciples about the coming hostility of the world (i.e. the moral order apart from God). The context of the disciples’ mission is opposition. There is a vast chasm between the world’s love of its’ own, and all that Jesus stood for (18-19). The principle being described is that like attracts like, and repels opposites.

Opposition is inevitable, and Jesus does not want his disciples to be under any delusions. This opposition originates from the disciples’ new nature. The world loves its own kind, but the disciples were chosen out of the world, and are not part of its opposition. They are of a different kingdom, going to a different place; therefore, they are hated, rather than loved. A further source of hostility was their identification with Jesus (21). The disciples shared Jesus’ life, and the world would treat them in the same way in which it treated him. In the midst of remaining in the joy of Jesus’ love (11), suffering and opposition are inevitable. Yet, in the mystery of God, passages such as Mark 13-15 and Acts 22-28 proclaim how the suffering of the apostles and believers is part of the divine plan – part of the process of God’s Kingdom breaking into the world.

So how does this translate into our nursing practice in a 21st century NHS? As a student, I often went about my placements with a complex about being ‘in the way’; a burden to staff; and generally a bit thick etc. That, coupled with never being anywhere long enough to build genuine relationships made me want to simply blend in, and achieve ticks in the right boxes for my final assessment!

However, Jesus is saying that if we remain in him, and love as he commands, then opposition and suffering are inevitable. So why do we often feel that something has gone terribly wrong if we face a bit of abuse for being a Christian? As a closet Manchester United

supporter, I wouldn't expect an easy time should I position myself in the middle of the Kop at Anfield, and start cheering for David Beckham! How much greater are the chances of opposition when following Jesus, and working in the world? Sharing in Christ's suffering is infinitely more profound and significant than allegiance to a footy team. Jesus has warned us so that we won't be caught off guard.

Due to an ignorance of the 'One who sent Jesus' (21), we may have colleagues who are verbally derogatory about our faith, our Lord and our lifestyle. People can be antagonistic when we speak of Jesus, because he begins to touch on their sin and guilt, and we all want that to stay hidden. You may find yourself taking a stand on an ethical/moral issue e.g. struggling to get anyone to help you clean up a patient after an episode of double incontinence, because the ward team are having an informal tea break, and would rather leave him for 20 minutes. What about a terminally ill patient who is left without nutrition and fluids? Are we at least willing to ask the rationale and challenge it if necessary, or do we try and camouflage ourselves within the ward environment? Are we going to get involved in the rampant ward gossip, which we secretly find titillating? Or do we avoid it, and risk feeling a bit excluded? What if a fellow student or colleague asks us to lie for them on the phone?

The bottom line is, if we are going to live for Christ, following his example of truth, love, compassion, justice and preservation of dignity, we will face opposition. Sometimes we will feel daunted and weary. However, we can take inspiration from the One we follow, the One who was hated first. It is an exciting paradox, and an immense privilege, that when we face opposition, it can be a tool for God's Kingdom breaking into the world. Furthermore, we are not alone in this. Christ, who has conquered sin, death, hell and Satan lives in us by his Spirit, and gives us the grace to deal with misunderstanding and hostility.

Questions for Discussion

1. Very often when we experience suffering for being a Christian we think we must have done something wrong. How would you answer someone who thought like this from John 15:18-25?
2. What temptations to blend in with the world do you face on placements and in lectures?
3. From John 15, what will help you to stand firm?
4. In John 15:11 Jesus talks about the joy that is the result of a relationship of love and obedience with him. How does this help us stand up with confidence in the face of suffering?
5. Look at Hebrews 2:10-11 and 4:14-16. What further comfort is there for us in understanding Jesus' sufferings?