

Jesus and his disciples were in the Temple, the disciples were admiring the architecture and the beautiful artefacts which adorned the building, but Jesus' mind was somewhere else. He was concerned with what was going to happen there in the not too distant future. *Not one stone will be left upon another*, he said, *all will be thrown down*. To the disciples, and any passing Jew who overheard these words, this must have been appalling, it is no wonder it formed a substantial part of the accusation against him at the trial which led to his crucifixion.

That did not prevent his prophecy being horrifically fulfilled. In AD 70 the Romans put down the Jewish rebellion, the Temple was destroyed, the city razed to the ground. A contemporary historian claimed that over a million Jews perished and that 600,000 were sold as slaves. Whatever the figures it was certainly the greatest catastrophe the Jewish nation was to suffer until the Holocaust of our own times.

Yet Jesus did not stop there, he went on to forecast a time of false prophets, political chaos and natural disasters which would test believers' faith to breaking point and he concludes this litany of misfortunes with, *By your endurance you will gain your souls*.

Which reminds me that someone once asked me, *How does one endure that which is unendurable*, how do you endure a situation when, in Gerard Manley Hopkins' words, you are *pitched past pitch of grief*.

This was a fear Jesus' listeners surely had as they contemplated their future. It is a very human fear, not one confined to the Jews of the 1st century. Perhaps one we ourselves have suffered, as we experience or anticipate some calamity which we cannot avert.

How do I endure that which is unendurable?

I want to suggest three answers.

There is the resilience of the human spirit which I for one never cease to be amazed at. Time and again the human spirit rises to the occasion even though that occasion may be the breaking up of the world we love and know. One parishioner who often comes to mind was a rough, unsophisticated woman who showed little or no religious faith. I visited her regularly when she was in the last stages of cancer and would invariably find her slumped in a chair in the tiny living room where all her family were gathered, usually watching horse racing on the television and where no attempt was ever made to turn it off even when I was praying with her. She enjoyed no privacy and little comfort from those nearest to her, yet she had a serenity and courage which still impresses me thirty years later. *Has she always been like this?* I asked her son. He laughed. *Not likely, she's been a holy terror*. Yet when it came to the crunch she endured the unendurable with grace and dignity. Most parsons I imagine could come up with

many such stories, the capacity of the human spirit to endure in the face of suffering is awesome. We ourselves never know the inner resources we possess until they are called on.

There is also the community. To know that others are standing with us in our sufferings and sharing them is a remarkable source of strength. The hardest day of my ministry was the day I had to conduct the funeral services of three twelve-year old boys killed in a school bus accident. All week I had been at the receiving end of people's grief - parents, brothers and sisters, school friends, teachers. When I became a priest the one thing I dreaded above all others was to have to take the funeral of a child, that Friday I had to take three. I, who am so emotional, am still bewildered that I managed to get through the day without cracking up, but I did. Last of all late that evening I visited the three bereaved families once again. It was Carol, the mother of James, one of the boys, who said, *You know, in a strange way I've enjoyed today.* I think I know what she meant. Never in the history of that village, except possibly in wartime, had there been such a feeling of community, the whole village was in mourning. There was a sense almost of transcendence. Carol herself recognised that the word she had chosen was inappropriate, but I knew what she meant, it was as if that day she had been taken out of herself and held in a community of grief. That week also the three bereaved families, who had not been at all close before, clung to each other, they found support in a shared grief. *We are all in it together* was not a shallow political slogan it was a reality. It was a source of strength.

And there is the strength to endure the unendurable given by the example of another who has travelled the same dark path and come through into the light. Someone I know well had a life-threatening breakdown in the 70's. It was, he says, the darkest time of his life. A poem, of all things, was what helped to bring him back to sanity. He became obsessed with T.S. Elliot's *Four Quartets*. He must have read them hundreds of times. He found in those poems an assurance that the poet too had experienced the disintegration he himself was going through but had emerged on the other side a wiser and more whole human being. When we are in great anguish the knowledge that someone else has been where we are and come through is a source of enormous strength. So I come to my final text for today, one of hope, for I believe suffering should not have the final word.

Wherefore, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, ... let us run with patience (or endurance, it is the same word) the race that is

set before us, looking unto Jesus who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

The Christian's consolation and strength when enduring the unendurable is the community, visible and invisible, seen and unseen, the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven which support us with their prayers and tears. And there is Jesus, our great forerunner, into whose wounded steps we may place our own. The phrase in the Creed which I value above all others is not that which speaks of our Lord ascending into Heaven, it is the one which speaks of him descending into Hell, for it assures me that there is no depth, there is no darkness into which I may be plunged where he has not been before.