

St Paul comes across as a bit of a firebrand both in his dealings with Christians before his conversion and in his dealings with both Christians and Jews afterwards. The Christians are afraid of him not only perhaps because of his previous role as a persecutor but because he seems to attract trouble wherever he goes. Hence, perhaps, the irony in that final verse from Acts today after he's sent on to Caesarea and Tarsus

*“The churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samara were now left in peace building themselves up, living in the fear of the Lord, and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit.”*

And this highlights, perhaps, the tension in our lives as Christians between suffering and joy. We naturally oppose them when, in fact, they are inextricably linked; you can have suffering without joy but, in Christ, you can't have joy without suffering – it's the nature of love, though the two are not necessarily coterminous., and it's the nature of Christ. So although the Christians of Judea, Galilee and Samara are now left in peace their work as Christians will not be without suffering, at the least they will have to suffer each other and always of course themselves. It's the nature of human discourse, of learning how to love. It's why Benedictines choose to live in community. It's why the Church insists on common worship, on the breaking of bread together. This is also what guards us against presumption. There will always be another person at one's door: the door of one's heart or conscience- in this public understanding of Church- to test the spirits, to further ones practice in the faith, to challenge ones ability to love and to extend it, or not. This is the suffering of love, our ultimate witness, which is never straightforward.

What I have in mind is the suffering which is often hidden because we present a certain persona in public and quite another in private and we are often puzzled ourselves at how this can be so. The danger of course is when the two aspects of our lives become so divorced that they are no longer in communication with one another – when joy and suffering, that is, are not seen as inextricably linked in Christ, in learning to love, and so the practice of love falls into abeyance and we visit our neglected suffering on others. I'm trying to make sense here of that final verse in today's gospel passage

*“It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear such fruit, And then you will be my disciples.”*

One could see this as inverting the order of grace and works – obey my commandments and then I will give you the grace of discipleship – a sort of earning ones way into heaven. Or one could see it as love or grace in practice – yes, grace is clearly at work in you because you are able to love,

Yes, this is evidence that you are part of the one vine that sustains you

Yes, that you are part of me as I am part of you

A clue to this for me is a translation of one verse in Paul's letter to the Romans which in one version says

*“he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God”(Rm 4:20 RSV)*

We can have a clear conscience, that is, without presumption, and be at peace with ourselves if we are at least struggling to love, to allow Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and knowing then that the fruit of our labour is not of our own doing either. We grow strong in faith as we practice it, we grow strong in love as God practices love in us. Cut off from God this does not happen – we are left then with suffering without joy, or, far worse, joy without suffering.

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