

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Epistle, Year C

SUFFERING THE FIERY ORDEAL

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Peter Keyel

4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

5:6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

DIAGNOSIS: We Can't Take This World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Devils Prowl around Us

Being God-fearing Christians, or even just good people who try to do right is never easy. Do we really need the text to remind

us that it is a constant struggle to do right in this world? Or can we look back through our week and see where our adversaries have been prowling around us. Have we managed to “do good” in the face of these devils? Love our neighbor, pray for those who hurt us... we all know the litany by now, just as the first recipients of this letter knew. But what does that cost us or our neighbor?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Suffering

The problem is that doing what we think is right usually leads to suffering, either ours or someone else's. It's hard to avoid suffering. Even when we try to embrace suffering, we cannot endure unlimited suffering. There's a point where enough is enough. We cannot rejoice in our own suffering, nor in the suffering of others around the world.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Fiery Ordeal

And yet, we shouldn't be surprised by our failure to deal with a lot, or even a little, suffering. Suffering is the way of the world, and we're trapped in those ways that lead to death. Worse still, it sometimes seems that God is testing us (or others) with suffering “for a little while.” Instead of “a little while,” we might better characterize it as a fiery ordeal. God's deliverance will not come in the way we may expect, and looking for deliverance on our terms does not get us out of the fiery ordeal.

PROGNOSIS: Christ Can Take Us

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Glory

Instead of delivering us from this world, God in Christ joins us in this world of prowling devils and suffering. Jesus suffered with us to the point of death on a cross. God's call to eternal glory was not that Jesus wouldn't suffer, but that fiery ordeal of suffering and death would not trap Jesus. God raised Jesus on

the third day to eternal glory as a promise to us. That promise is given on God's terms, not ours, and it is not based on our ability to survive in the fiery ordeal.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Steadfast in Faith

Through Christ, God's promise is to "restore, support, strengthen, and establish" us. Where before we may have focused on our suffering and enduring in the midst of it, in light of the risen Christ, we can now see Christ's glory reflected onto us. We are freed to cast our anxieties on Christ. We are given steadfast faith that God will bring us through our suffering even when we cannot do it ourselves.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Spirit of God Rests on Us

When we feel that steadfast faith—that spirit of God's glory resting on us—we feel blessed even in the face of adversity. People may revile us or do worse, but we can stay focused on the Spirit of God that strengthens and supports us. We know the cost is borne by God, who will see us through this world. This frees us to help others, and to reconcile with adversaries.