

St Stephen's, San Jose  
February 16, 2014  
Feast of the Martyrs of the Sudan

Hebrews 10:32-39  
Matthew 24:9-14

In 1983 the government of the Sudan was seized by fundamentalist who declared Shirah Law, requiring that all Sudanese convert to Islam on penalty of death. A handful of Episcopal and Roman Catholic chiefs, together with their bishops, clergy and laity in southern Sudan declared that they "would not abandon God as they knew Him." With that declaration the second cycle of civil war began, the first having run from 1957 with the departure of the British until 1972. The peace was finally signed on January 9, 2005 after 2.5 million people were killed, mostly Christian.

The UN and the US State Department have declared that the Sudan is the most devastated country in the world today. Everything in South Sudan has been destroyed; including all the villages, schools and churches; there are no infrastructures left. No building has remained standing in an area the size of Alaska. Of a southern population of six million, two-thirds of the people are displaced from their homes, with another million in exile throughout Africa and the world.

In 1983 it was estimated that 5% of the population of the south was Christian. Today nearly 90% are either Episcopalian or Roman Catholic. The bishops, including Episcopal Bishop Nathaniel Garang, are clear when they say that "we live only on the mercy of God...whether we live or die we are the Lord's...we have had nothing else but the grace of God and his guidance." After South Sudan became her own country, it is now embroiled in inter-tribal warfare.

And so today, as civil war decimates South Sudan, we pray for the people of that new country, and of every tribe there; we pray for the Sudanese we know who have visited us here and preached here. We pray for the children.

It is difficult to imagine the chaos of having family members executed, and having people's homes and villages destroyed. But all of us can relate to the reality of trouble and pain in our life. This earth is not heaven, and is far from perfect. And on this side of heaven, pain and suffering are a reality that we face, and we have to learn to persist through.

The author of Hebrews explains that suffering can build character and patience for those with faith. During times of great stress, we may feel God's presence more clearly and find help from Christians we never thought would care.

Hebrews encourages us not to abandon faith in times of persecution, but to show by endurance that our faith is real. Faith means resting in what Christ has already done for

us, and also trusting him for what he will do for us in the present and in the future. Romans 8:12-25 says, 'Even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering.'

We need to remind ourselves as people of faith in a loving God, that God will not waste a hurt. He uses trouble to accomplish good; to develop our character. We have certainly seen the humble and grace-filled character of the Sudanese young men we have met here. Every problem, every trouble, every incident of suffering has spiritual significance for believers.

Problems that we cannot solve force us to look to God, and to depend on God. Paul understood this when he wrote (2 Cor 1:9), "We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us."

We need to remember in the midst of our own trouble that God has a plan, and it is divinely good. (Jeremiah 29.11) God told Jeremiah, "The plans I have for you are plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

We need to stay focused on God's plan, rather than on the problem.

We need to give thanks to God that He will use our problems to fulfill His purpose.

We need to ask God what He wants us to learn.

>What problem in your life has caused the greatest growth in you?

For me it has been my wife Ruth's fight against cancer. We have spent many evenings, many meals, talking about what she has gone through with surgery, treatments, and side effects. As the spouse I have learned how to give meaningful support, what to say and what not to say to others with cancer, and how to manage the fear and the unknowns of cancer, knowing the limits of human medicine.

When we remember our faith, when we rely on our faith, when we trust our God in and through our hurt and suffering, we can be transformed by our trouble.

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, (Romans 8:28) "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

May we allow God to use our troubles to transform us into people of deepened faith; people with trust in God's plan; people living into the character of Jesus Christ. Amen