

March 27, 2011

The Third Sunday in Lent

Romans 5:1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Suffering

Some of you will know the story of Louis Zamperini from the book *Unbroken* (Random House, 2010) by Laura Hillenbrand of *Seabiscuit* fame. He was a star athlete destined for great things in the world of Olympic runners before America entered the Second World War. He joined the Air Force and was eventually assigned as a bombardier in the Pacific theater. After some great runs he was in a plane that crashed in the Pacific while searching for survivors of another downed plane. He survived for a record breaking and unbelievable forty-six days in a raft with two other men, one of whom died on the journey. After many adventures with sharks and the raw livers of albatross, they drifted into Japanese territory. Louie and Phil Phillips, his pilot, were taken prisoner and subjected to the most sadistic personal brutality in a number of Japanese camps for Prisoners of War. After suffering near starvation, significant disease and degradation, Louie was liberated after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Asked by a journalist to summarize his experience he said that if he knew he had to go through it again he would kill himself. After the war, he married on his way to becoming alcoholic before being persuaded by his wife to attend a rally led by Billy Graham. He remembered his many promises to God during his days on the water and his days in the camps. He met with, wrote and forgave all those guards who had been so brutal as well as thanking those from whom he had received tiny acts of kindness. As best I can tell, he is ninety-four and still with us. In 1984, when the Olympics were in Nagano, Japan, he accepted an invitation to carry the Olympic torch through one of the places he had been held captive and tortured.

This is certainly a story of suffering and endurance and character and even hope. But it is far from clear to me that the sufferings he endured are or should be matters for boasting.

We are confronted with the suffering of others and in various ways, our own, every single day at the moment. I subscribe to the English version of the news aggregation magazine called *The Week* and the last issue had a cover picture of a Japanese woman weeping that was like an arrow to my soul. The Japanese people need our compassion and help very much in this, their time of trial. I can't explain it. Nor can I explain how I am sometimes able to feel compassion for those afraid of their own government and those being bombed by those seeking to offer support in Libya. This is compounded by what is going on at home as budget cutting fervor devolves from the federal government to the states to the cities to our teachers and firefighters and police officers. Political sound bites are not making for creative, imaginative government policy and we are facing a

possible, even likely, paralysis of our federal government. Even nearer to home we have people wondering whether they can go on, whether it is 'worth it', and whether ending it all is not a reasonable option in the circumstance. It is worth it of course, but that doesn't get rid of the question.

Suffering certainly requires endurance, the long view, inner resources and so on. And endurance can, up to a point, produce character. I think it more likely however that it will reveal character formed before the suffering is made manifest. And people of well-formed character --integrity, differentiation, the capacity to stay connected with others, be generous and so on-- is most certainly marked by reasonable and holy hope.

I suspect that if we could have a conversation I would not be disagreeing with St. Paul in his tightly argued *Epistle to the Romans*. We would agree that character and hope and so on are a consequence as well as a manifestation of the grace in which we stand having been "justified by faith". We would agree that there is a sense in which suffering is put into perspective by that divine grace and that from the perspective of grace, suffering is most certainly not the last word, nor is it what defines us. I would even agree that there is a sense in which God desires to use everything in life, even something as ghastly as the cross in order to make manifest the power of love. But *boasting* in our sufferings as though they were somehow good or desirable is something I cannot do.

At various times during the trials and tribulations of Louis Zamperini, and doubtless countless others who suffered in Japanese prison camps, it was remembering something important that kept them going. In the raft they kept their minds agile by remembering everything they could, including, for example, discussing recipes and meals in great detail as a way of tricking their bodies into thinking that they had been fed. Certainly they remembered parents and brothers and sisters and loved ones. From time to time Zamperini wanted to remember prayers but had not really practiced the faith enough to be able to do more than remember bits and pieces of religious expression from movies.

Remembering who we are through telling the stories of what really matters is something that the more we do, the more we will be prepared when the challenges of suffering come to call. I worry a bit about the shifting patterns of attendance in worship that have been occurring throughout this country in recent years, including in the South. With increased affluence and more opportunities, we have been attending worship with less frequency than might have been true for us in the past. I worry, because I think it will make us less effective and less of a leaven in the world in times of conflict, anxiety, and yes, even suffering when that comes our way. For it is here that our character is formed and shaped toward what really matters such that we find that we can endure suffering, reveal real character and live in the assurance of a reasonable and holy hope in God's extraordinary, sustaining and transformative love for us. We are formed through remembering the story of our faith, enacting in some sense, making it real in the here and now as we gather around the Table with all manner of humanity,

offering ourselves and finding our lives returned to us with our vision a little less distorted than before and so freed to live a little more generously and courageously in the good times and in the bad. In the self-examination of Lent, our commitment to weekly worship is one of the things that might benefit from renewed consideration.

So, as ever, I invite you to respond to the gospel in prayer, perhaps remembering Louis Zamperini, and asking that we be granted what we need to endure with character and live with hope that does not disappoint us when the trials of life come our way; and giving thanks that what we do here each week is part of the answer to that prayer. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...