

In hearing today's Gospel, it is easy for us to understand that the sons of Zebedee hardly knew the implications of what they're asking of Our Lord. But they certainly knew what they wanted. Jesus had promised the Apostles that they would sit upon twelve thrones and judge the tribes of Israel. James and John wanted the highest positions, to share the office of something like what we would call a Prime Minister.

It would be natural for the disciples to strive for excellence since God created every person to do so. And it would be natural for them to think that excellence would mean privilege, honor and glory, for that is how everyone seems to think of it, whether Jew or Gentile. Both the chief priests and the Roman governors were surrounded with pomp and circumstance, servants ... and more.

Jesus wanted them to be ambitious, but for true greatness, which is not about big heads but big hearts. And Jesus had begun to show them what that would look like, but they'd not gotten there quite yet.

Their feet had not yet been washed and the King was still to be crowned with thorns. They had not come to understand that love is self-emptying, that greatness lies in sacrifice, that "prime minister" would come to mean servant of all.

In a world where self-interest and self-promotion are the law of the land, such a love is destined to suffer. To be great in love is to suffer much. This is the “cup” that Jesus speaks about.

He had come to drain this bitter cup by His life and His death.

The road to Christ’s kingdom is always by way of His cross. To share in His glory, we must be willing to accept suffering, not as a necessary evil, but as a means of growing in love! If one is currently in the throes of suffering, this can be hard to hear.

We must come to look upon our trials and sufferings as our portion of the cup He promised to those who believe in Him. We must remember that we have been baptized, immersed, into His passion and death. This is never easy. And there are times when it may well take heroic virtue to pass through it.

We rely on God for the strength we need. Prayer, fasting and alms are usually Lenten themes, but they cannot be limited to seasons or times. They are tools to hammer through the barriers that pain or suffering can put in our way. They are a way to hold fast to our confession of faith, as today’s Epistle instructs us to do. They are our arsenal in our battles and our strengthening, our conditioning in Our Lord and Savior.

To suffer and endure as Christ did seems an impossible task. And to do so on our own is impossible. But we are never alone. A great cloud of witnesses to the power and glory of God surround us!

I look out today and see concrete examples among us! People who have faced cancer, the loss of loved ones, who have known poverty and want, yet . . . Christ lives in you.

Then there are the Saints – those who have gone through what we currently experience, and even what we may never experience, and have entered into Glory. They are near us in faith, in suffering and in joy. One of the great paradoxes of our faith is that suffering and joy are not mutually exclusive, they can exist side-by-side.

This weekend, Pope Benedict XVI will name two Americans as Saints.

The first is Blessed Kateri (kuh-TARE-ee) Tekakwitha (tek"uh-kwith'uh) is also known as the "Lily of the Mohawks." She was born in 1656 of Mohawk and Algonquin parents . She lost her parents and siblings to smallpox when she was only four. The disease left her nearly blind and her face deeply scarred for life. Despite the anger and threats of her relatives, Kateri (kuh-TARE-ee) was drawn to the faith by the teachings of missionary priests. She had to live in exile from her tribe as she was threatened with death unless she denounced her Catholic faith.

The second is closer to us in time. Blessed Marianne Cope joined the Sisters of Saint Francis in Syracuse, New York, in 1862. She became a leader in the field of healthcare, often caring for those considered "outcasts," which then led her to volunteer in the Hawaiian island of

Molokai where, along with St. Damien, she took care of the lepers and the poor.

These Saints knew what it was to drink the cup of suffering, but they also knew of the power and grace of another cup – the Cup of Salvation. The sweetness of this cup can make the sufferings of this life, more than bearable. This cup draws us ever closer to Jesus, deepening our love for Him and for neighbor.

We know that there is no shortage of suffering in the world. But God has provided all that we need to endure and to become victorious. In confidence, we can approach the altar today, this throne of grace, at which we eat of His glorified body and drink of this sweetest of cups.

Let us echo the prayer of the Psalmist:

Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.