

Today's first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles. The beauty of this book is the focus on action, inspired by direct contact with Jesus. It is through these acts of faith, courage, and love that we have the worldwide church as we know it today.

Each of us has a responsibility to continue this mission and make our own contributions. Think of it as "The Acts of the St Jamesians and Saint Leoites." Every day we, together, strive to put another verse or chapter into our story, inspired by Christ.

Paul and Barnabas say in today's reading, "It is necessary for us to undergo MANY HARDSHIPS to enter the kingdom of God." There are two types of hardships in life, hardships imposed by our circumstances, like the death of a loved one, the loss of a job or a serious illness. The other type of hardships are those we chose, like the apostles, when they decided to go out into the world to spread the gospel of Christ in the face of persecution and rejection.

In both cases we "undergo" hardship, a word that means "to submit to" or "endure." Webster's dictionary uses the example, "to undergo a transformation." Hardships in our lives, though painful, offer an opportunity to be transformed into better versions of ourselves. This requires that we engage the Lord in our journey.

In today's reading from Revelation, we hear a loud voice from the throne saying, "God's dwelling is with the human race." God is always with us, especially in times of hardship. This reading ends with, "Behold, I make all things new." He even goes as far as to say, "Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true." God is saying, "Count on me to restore you in your time of need."

A few weeks ago, I met a blind deacon, a smiling, silver-haired man in a wheelchair named "Ed." After complications during his back surgery, he lost his ability to walk and was blinded. After five months of hospital rehab he returned home.

In spite of his circumstances, he approached his pastor and requested permission to continue reading the gospel and preaching at mass. The Pastor was thrilled to let him continue, in spite of his challenging circumstances.

Deacon Ed made an arrangement with his son to read and record the gospel for him whenever he preaches. Deacon Ed listens to the recording, over and over again, until he practically memorizes it. During mass he uses an earphone to listen to his son's recording as he proclaims the gospel to the congregation. Once in a while his earphone falls out, he says, "That's when the congregation hears, "The Gospel according to Ed."

In Deacon Ed we see a combination of imposed and chosen hardships. With his surgery outcome, he turned to the Lord throughout his rehab. And when he returned home, the Holy Spirit gave him the courage to choose to be an active deacon rather than retiring.

This is the Lord's version of making ALL THINGS NEW: a new way of touching his congregation as a blind deacon, a new way of engaging his son in scripture reading, and a new way to inspire US to seek the Lord when tragedy strikes and to give HIM glory no matter what our circumstances. Deacon Ed's acts of courage and faith will certainly be written into the "Acts of the Saint Patrickites!" up in Carlsbad.

Realistically, there may never be an "Acts of" book written for our parish, so it's really important for each of us to share our stories of faith in hardship, as Deacon Ed shared with me. We sometimes think we are alone in our suffering, especially if we spend time on social media where we often get a sense that everyone's life is perfect.

But we can learn a lot from sharing and being vulnerable with our brothers and sisters as the early Christians did. When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch: "They called the church together and reported what God had done WITH THEM and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."

What has God done WITH YOU in your journey and times of hardship? In recent conversations with men in our parish, I was surprised to learn how many of them turn to the rosary in times of crisis. They shared that the rosary has a calming effect when life spins out of control and provides a much needed calm over the anxiety in our hearts. For me, there's something very tangible about praying the rosary. After the 15 to 20 minutes it takes to pray, I'm in a different place. I no longer feel alone in my hardship, I'm connected with the Mother of Jesus who knows what sorrow is, and she is interceding for me with her son.

But the rosary is just one option. What do you turn to? Other prayers? Adoration? A saint? The bible or another spiritual book? Coffee or a walk on the beach with a friend who shares your Christian journey? These are all ways to let the Lord make all things new!

I will finish with a quote from Pope Francis that sums up our approach to difficult situations. "Difficulties and trials are part of the path that leads to God's glory, just as they were for Jesus, who was glorified on the cross; we will always encounter them in life! Do not be discouraged! We have the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome these trials!"