

St Thérèse of Lisieux and Suffering



What is suffering?

Think of a time when you have been in pain or felt very sad about something. When we feel like this, we are suffering. Suffering is the opposite of joy. Where joy makes us smile and laugh, suffering makes us feel sad and we may cry. Joy and suffering are both part of life. Think of the rose - it has beautiful flowers but very sharp thorns. Life is like that - the flowers are like joy that brightens up our life and makes us feel happy whereas the thorns are sharp and painful and are like the suffering in our life. Everyone experiences both joy and suffering at some time in their life and these feelings help us to become the person God has created us to be.

What did Jesus say about suffering?

Jesus said: *"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me."* (Mark 8:34) In other words, Jesus was saying that following Him would not always be easy but He showed us that He is with us in our times of suffering. Think of all the people Jesus healed or helped. Many of them were suffering because of illness, loneliness or their wrongdoings. Jesus helped these people in their suffering and showed them how much God cares for them. Jesus Himself suffered when He carried His cross and was crucified and yet He never stopped trusting in God's love and care. Jesus showed us that God is with us in a special way in our suffering; the suffering may not go away but if we ask God, He will give us the strength to cope with it.

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From an early age, St Thérèse knew what it felt like to suffer. She was only four years old when her mother died after a long illness. Her sister, Pauline, then helped to bring Thérèse up but when Thérèse was eight, her sister left to become a nun. Once again Thérèse felt alone and abandoned. Shortly after Thérèse became a nun, her father became very ill and Thérèse and her sisters worried greatly about him until he died. At the age of twenty-three, Thérèse herself became seriously ill and she died of an illness called tuberculosis when she was only twenty-four. St Thérèse therefore understood the sadness a person feels when someone they love is ill and then dies. She knew what it was like to feel lonely and to suffer from illness.

Throughout her life and particularly in her suffering, Thérèse's trust in God was strong even though she sometimes felt that God seemed far away. Before she died, she was able to look back on her life and see that God had been with her in her sadness and suffering. In her autobiography, Thérèse wrote:

"I have experienced tribulations of all sorts and suffered a great deal. When I was a child, suffering used to make me sad; now I taste its bitterness with joy and peace."

Thérèse understood that suffering and sadness is part of life. When she was sad, lonely or ill, she asked God to help her in her pain. She said that suffering helps to make a person kinder towards others because it draws us closer to God. Because of this, Thérèse started to accept suffering happily because she recognised it as a gift from God to help her to grow closer to Him. Each time she suffered, she felt that she was sharing in Jesus' suffering in a very special way.

What can we learn from St Thérèse?

Life is a mixture of joy and sadness. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean we will never know pain or suffering. Instead, being a follower of Jesus helps us to understand the purpose of pain and sadness. Jesus showed us how much God loves and cares for us in our suffering and that God helps us when we suffer. St Thérèse believed that suffering helped her to grow closer to God and she always asked God to help her in times of sadness and pain. Thérèse shows us that we too must trust in God's love for us even when things are difficult and we can ask God to give us the strength we need to cope with the suffering.