FEBRUARY 23

THE NEW SHOFAR

It is in the course of our feeble and very imperfect waiting that God Himself, by His hidden power, strengthens us and works out in us the patience of the great saints, the patience of Christ Himself. Andrew Murray

It all comes down to trusting God

If nothing else, today's first reading challenges us as we wonder why we have it as a part of our Sunday Eucharist. "What does it mean" would be a reasonable question to ask. Scratch the surface a little though, and it is very much a reading for the times. Its message can be summed up in one word: **Patience**. It challenges us at a most basic level to ask ourselves whether our faith is deep enough for us to trust in God to care for us. It is much easier to tackle things on our own, in our own way and according to a timetable that best suits us.

Saul is making David his enemy and wants to kill him

The situation was not good. Saul is back to hunting David and has forced him to go on the run. You would think this would give David even more of a reason to take revenge on his enemy, but David has been learning the hard way that while God's ways can at times be confusing, he can be trusted. God has faith in us. Time and time again he has been able to survive and continue on his God-given mission. Remember his battle with Goliath? The odds were heavily stacked against him, and he had no real weapons, just a stone and a slingshot. But Goliath went down! With great celebration David *took the Philistine's head and brought it to Jerusalem; he put the Philistine's weapons in his own tent*. He knew that the victory was God's.

Life requires patience from us

Although most people consider patience to be a passive waiting or gentle tolerance, most of the Greek words used to translate "patience" in the New Testament are active, robust words. Consider, for example, **Hebrews 12:1**: *Therefore since we also are surrounded with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily besets us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us*. The word translated "patience" in this verse means "endurance."

A Christian runs the race patiently by persevering in the face of difficulties. In the Bible, patience is persevering towards a goal, enduring trials, or expectantly waiting for a promise to be fulfilled. It is trusting God, even if we are unable to pinpoint the help God is offering to us. But learning endurance does not happen by chance. Patience does not suddenly pop up in our lives. It is something God does in us the more we grow in our intimate relationship with him.

Collaborate with God

God's power and goodness are crucial to the development of patience. **Colossians 1:11** tells us that we are strengthened by Him to "*great endurance and patience*," while **James 1:3-4** encourages us to know that trials are His way

of perfecting our patience. Our patience is further developed and strengthened by resting in God's perfect will and timing, even in the face of evil men who "*succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes*" (**Psalm 37:7**). Our patience is rewarded in the end "*because the Lord's coming is near*" (**James 5:7-8**). "*The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him*" (**Lamentations 3:25**). And that is where David was standing as we join the story.

What does God want – not what we might or might not prefer

The challenge for us is to seek His purposes, to hand ourselves over to God and accept God's agenda and timetable. Sometimes God allows us to wander into difficult situations so that we can be his witness. Other times, He might allow a trial for sanctification of character. This is never more so than in our relationships with others. History is a great reminder of how most of us, at one stage or another, will have the equivalent of "Sauls" in our lives, those people who annoy me, misunderstand me, persecute me and give me nothing but more grief. The alternative is also true. I can be Saul to others and not realise it or feel I can justify my actions in the name of righteousness or another excuse that is self-delusion.

Remembering that His purpose is for our growth and His glory will help us in the trial. When things get tough we find comfort and courage in St Paul's words in **Romans 8:28** which reassures us that in *all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*." The "all things" include the things that try our patience. It might be that our" Sauls" are the ones to whom we have been sent, and that their persecution is exactly what it is God is seeking to address by the way we love them, and, like David, do not take the opportunity to pick up the spear and strike him down. That is where the gift of patience is required.

The point here is to trust God, not people. Think about it. David and Abishai were alone amid three thousand enemy soldiers, but they were perfectly safe because God was protecting them. On the other hand, Saul was being protected by Abner and three thousand soldiers, and he was completely defenceless. How could he manage that? David's **Psalm (146)** says: *Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing*. He understood that while people might let us down, God will never forsake us. Trust in God, not people.

Love those who hate you

Luke's sermon today is not meant to be an unattainable goal. This kind of living is exactly what God demands of us. It sets out the parameters for living as disciples of his Son and will therefore feature in our judgment. There is no wriggle room given here and no possible justification for making this teaching our priority. Yes, it hurts. Yes, it is humbling, and it can make us vulnerable, but it is what God demands. What we cannot achieve on our own God makes possible through grace. And it just might be that the stone in our shoe is the very person God is seeking to heal through the graces he is pouring into our souls., through the love we show them.