

BEING HUMAN

That was the title of a great British Sci-Fi/Fantasy series a number of years ago about a werewolf, a vampire and a ghost who become roommates. Each of them could have chosen to live a rather charmed life, using their inhuman powers and happily surviving on the misery of others. But instead, all they really wanted was to be human, with all the pain and grief, all the joy and love that “being human” entails.

That series popped back into my head in recent weeks as I studied the Book of Job in Georgetown, listened to the news reports about the growing opioid epidemic and read an item in the paper about young people waiting for the next “enhanced reality” game to replace Pokémon Go. And then I recalled stories of comfort animals and “safe spaces” for college students who can’t seem to handle being stressed or challenged. And finally, I read the passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans that we hear this weekend: *“Brothers and sisters, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.”* All of those converged to make me consider the challenge that so many people—especially young people—seem to be wrestling with these days.

I find myself regularly using the phrase “we live in a world that...” in homilies and in these reflections because I think it’s so important to connect the timeless Word of God with the real world of today. And what St. Paul says to the Church in Rome is a challenge for people in every generation to accept all that comes with *being human* and to recognize that something amazing is waiting for us beyond the pain and grief and even beyond the joy and love of this life. It seems to me that the opioid “epidemic” that appears so rampant today has its origins in the belief that life should be free of pain—at any cost. The abundance of drug ads on TV always show people who take the advertised drugs frolicking through fields, climbing mountains, playing on the beach or picnicking with their families as the voice-over describes all the side effects that range from diarrhea to death.

Is it wrong to try our best to relieve the aches and pains of life? Of course not. Is it wrong to seek solace or sympathy when we fall or fail? No. But it is wrong to think that every ache or pain, every moment of sadness or stress, disappointment or loss must be excised from human life—again, at any cost. Confronting, sometimes overcoming or, ultimately accepting all of those **human** experiences, is the true measure of our humanity. That’s something that Job learns at the end of a long and painful journey when God finally speaks and essentially says “I’m God and you’re not; get over it.” No matter how far medical science comes in managing or defeating the maladies that can afflict us, our lives on this earth will never be pain-free, and in the end we will all have to surrender to death, no matter how far life-expectancy may be extended (the latest estimate is 120 years—and “that’s all folks!”).

Those of us who have confronted, overcome or accepted the fact that life doesn't dance to our tune need to help young people face, not escape from, the realities of *being human*. The absurdity of "safe spaces" on college campuses will never prepare students for the very unsafe world in which we all have to survive. Words that hurt, ideas we find obnoxious, people who rub us the wrong way will, like the poor of the Gospel, always be with us. And there's nothing wrong with "enhanced reality" games as long as they don't become an endless escape from the really real where toothaches, tummy aches and, sooner or later, muscle aches, will always be waiting just around the corner.

"Brothers and sisters, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." I suppose that if that passage from Romans were to be summed up in just two words, it might be "delayed gratification." *Being human* means that we can't have it all now, we do the best we can with the life we've been given, and we trust that one day we **will** have it all when God's glory is revealed in us. In the meantime, there will be pain and grief, suffering and stress and disappointment. But there will also be beauty and wonder, joy and love and fulfillment for all of us who allow ourselves to be immersed in the reality of this imperfect and wonderful life.

Fr. Bob