

Sunday.24

Last Thursday there was a meeting at Harris Hall to talk about National Grid's wish to raise prices for its customers here in RI by 11 percent, which would amount to an increase of about \$8.00 a month for the average customer here. Henry Sheldon from the George Wiley Center tried to get as many people as he could to attend the meeting. The turn-out in Pawtucket had been good, but here fewer people, about thirty or so, attended.

The representative for National Grid spoke first and explained that the present systems used for the transfer of gas and electricity are old and need to be up-dated, and that costs money. In fact, last week power was lost on Main Street for almost a day, and now some businesses are suing National Grid. The Call, you may remember, missed a day of publication because of this outage.

Then the locals came to the mike. Their stories had a common theme: This is not the time for raising prices. Many people today cannot afford to pay more for their gas and electricity. They are trying to economize as much as they can by not using their dryers or air-conditioners and by keeping the heat down, even down in the fifties, in the winter. In a word, people are hurting.

A second theme was the injustice of the present system which leaves people here in Woonsocket no choice. If they want electricity and gas, they have to get it from National Grid. To put it very strongly, they are the subjects—the slaves—of National Grid, a foreign (I believe, British) company. It almost sounds as though we here in Woonsocket need to engineer another Tea Party, as our neighbors to the north did when they were still British colonists.

But what has all this to do with today's readings? Today's first reading from Isaiah and the Gospel from Mark both speak of suffering. Chapter 50, from which we read, contains the third "servant song," that is, material describing someone who will be God's servant and save his people, even though he will have to suffer in doing so. Christians reading these verses 500 years after they were written could not but see them as describing the Lord Jesus in his suffering and death. Here is the Lord's servant who gave his back to those who beat him, his cheeks to those who plucked his beard, and his face to buffets and spitting, but remained convinced that God would help him. Is this not exactly what Jesus did?

In today's Gospel from Mark Jesus tries to tell his disciples for the first time that he is going to fail, but they will not listen to him. No doubt they, like the crowds who were amazed at Jesus' powerful words and healings, felt that he would be the one to restore their political freedom by leading a successful revolt against the Romans. Peter feels this way and tries to persuade Jesus that this is the path he should take, but Jesus rejects his advice and even calls him Satan. Only after his death will his disciples be able to grasp Jesus' message. Then they will be forced to accept not a politically victorious Messiah but a suffering messiah, a reality, a concept which was totally foreign to them before the Lord's death.

The connection, then, between the hearing at Harris Hall and the readings is suffering. Admittedly, when we hear the word suffering, we do not think of people complaining about rate hikes. We think of people in Africa who don't have running water or people who have to hide from violence and live without a government that can protect them from violence. We also think of those who suffer emotionally, say, at the death of a loved one, or those who suffer from seeing a loved one falling into deeper and deeper dementia. Yes, these are the greater sufferings. But to live here in the winter without sufficient heat or even without shelter is

also to suffer, and we who follow a suffering messiah should see him in such people.

There is so much violence, war and injustice in our world. There is so much suffering. No wonder then that when God comes among us in human form, in the person of Jesus, he must enter into our suffering. A god who would draw close to us but not enter into our suffering would be a god who could not draw close to us.

And so we look at the cross and see the God who has entered into our human condition completely: mentally, physically and emotionally. We thank him for sharing our pain with us. We thank him for being with us in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death finally releases us and brings us to him in glory. We also ask for the grace to recognize him in our sisters and brothers who suffer in ways both great and small. We also ask him for the grace and strength to embrace our own crosses, both great and small.