

Reflections for 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Cost of Discipleship

“Unless you take up your cross and follow me you cannot be my disciples.”



What a paradox we find from last Sunday readings to today's Gospel readings! Last week, Peter confessed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. In today's Gospel reading, Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to tell him what to do. Last week, Jesus called Peter the "rock" and today Jesus calls Peter a tempter and tells him to leave. These contrasting events took place within a period of very short time. What happened?

Jesus knowingly confronted his disciples with the reality of the cross, which often is seen as an obstacle in their following Jesus and commitment to him. Jesus told them plainly that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly there at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and then be raised on the third day. It is clear that the words like "suffering" and "be killed" troubled them so much they ignored the last phrase, "be raised on the third day." We

can understand the disciples' quick shift in their mood when they heard that Jesus was going to suffer. From a human point of view, it is very natural for Peter to avoid any kind of suffering for Jesus. But, according to Jesus that is precisely Peter's problem because he is speaking from the human point of view and not from the perspective of God.

So then, how do we understand the suffering and the cross from the perspective of Jesus himself?

The Gospels do not say that Jesus went forward and took upon himself suffering. This would be a demonstration of his own power. He used all his power for the up-building of the kingdom of God. He was forcibly led to his suffering at the hands of the elders. But, he did it willingly and not as a volunteer. Jesus was a victim. The manner of his torment and suffering was decided by someone else. In another word, this was God's will for him to be fulfilled.

The cross for us refers to the suffering which comes into our lives because of the choices we make for the sake of the Gospel. It can be something that we choose. The cross is a symbol for sacrifice. Sacrifice is a word that we do not like because it suggests hardship, discipline, renunciation, pain etc. Yet, there is no achievement without sacrifice. Jesus himself has given us the example. He chose the way of self-sacrifice and suffering. Therefore, Jesus asked his disciples for total commitment to follow and take up their daily crosses. **"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, he must renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.... Anyone loses his life for my sake will find it."** For us as Christians this suffering is not an option – rather, it is a certainty. If we participate in his success, we must also share in his shame and suffering. We as disciples of Jesus have a choice to follow or not to follow. But if we follow, we choose in his favor and we must be ready for suffering and humiliation.

One of the reasons why we normally don't like to be confronted by the cross is that true love is sacrificial. Married couples promise to love each other, religious promise to love the Lord and His Church and so also as Christian we are called to love each other. But, when we are tempted to drift away from the true love, the cross reminds us that true love is defined not by how we feel but by what we give. Another reason why we don't like to be confronted by the cross, is that cross is the only way to eternal life. Many of us prefer an easier way of life. Like Peter, we don't want the cross. We want to avoid the crosses of our daily lives but in reality, we cannot if we want to gain the eternal life.

Everyone in the world has a cross. Our crosses can take the form of emotional, spiritual, physical and mental suffering. As we go through this terrible pandemic, many are the crosses we carry every day. The real issue is what do we do with these different crosses? Do we deny them? Do we rebel against them? Do we try to kick them off? Do we numb them with addictive substances? Or do we take them up and follow the Lord? It is here we make the choice either to save our life, or to lose our life.

Further, in today's second reading, Paul exhorts us to reject the standard of this world. **"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."** This is very difficult path to follow as we sometimes experience the paradox that those who conform to this world, prosper much more than those who do not. To this end, following Christ can place barriers between ourselves and others. When we don't share others' values and their interests we can experience alienation from others. Therefore, suffering is bound to happen in our daily ministry. We need to remind ourselves that Jesus' message angered many people of his time, so when we proclaim the same message, we must also be prepared for a similar reaction.

Finally, it is quite comforting to know that even someone as great as Jeremiah contemplated changing his options as he went through struggles in his life. But, Jeremiah's life of struggle and fidelity is a source of courage and inspiration to us. His total faithfulness prefigures the faithfulness of Jesus. Jesus' own example and the example of Jeremiah can inspire us to be faithful to our vocation as Jesus' disciples.

Let us pray today for all of us, and especially for young people as they discern their vocation to Jesus' calling to be who he wants them to be. May we all try our best to remain faithful to his calling. Amen



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