

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B/2006

By human experience we know that if someone defends noble ideas or profound truths, or if someone loves deeply, he does it with all his heart and energy. To love deeply or to defend persistently one's ideas and convictions implies that one is ready to accept suffering and sacrifice associated with the noble cause he is defending. Just as it is for human beings, so it is for the cause of God.

The prophet Isaiah, who has accepted the call he has received from God to serve him, is torn with suffering and humiliation from his adversaries. Because of God, he has become a laughing stock; he is insulted and mocked by people; he feels hunted and persecuted. And yet, it was with joy that he has accepted his vocation and did not rebel against God's call; but all that has turned bitter.

When someone is in such a situation, humanly speaking he is tempted to give up everything and to save his life. This is what many of us do in time of misunderstanding, adversity and conflict; but this is not the case with the prophet as we heard in the first reading. To those who struck him, he even offered his back and when his adversaries tore his beard and spit on him, he did not cover his face.

Should he abandon the work of God even though his life is in danger? No, he did not. Then where does his strength come from? The servant of the Lord is assured that whatever may happen to him and whatever suffering he might go through, God is with him. God will assist and sustain him because of the righteousness of the cause he is defending.

It does not mean that the suffering the prophet is enduring loses its virulence; it means only that he does not bear it alone, but with God. So the servant is not afraid of the danger surrounding his life. He knows that God is his help and nobody will prove him wrong. The same is true about our own lives as we fulfill our daily duties and endure the burdens of our different commitments and occupations in society. We are not alone; God is with us, sharing with us each burden of life as we try to be faithful to our commitments and promises before him and our fellow human beings.

This fate of the servant of God foreshadows the destiny of Jesus Christ, the messenger of God as we heard in the Gospel. Indeed, Christ was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected and put to death, and then to rise after three days.

It was very difficult for the disciples to understand Jesus' mission in such a way. Even Peter, who seemed usually more inspired than the others, cannot see things in that way. This is why he remonstrates with Jesus. For him such a thing cannot happen – it is unthinkable. And yet, this is Jesus' destiny.

Peter's objection summarizes all the attempts of humans to discourage others from accomplishing their tasks. Peter's act symbolizes the human temptation to seek above all their own security. It masks our own attitude which tells us that our own life is more valuable than that of others and for that we have to protect it

any cost. If Jesus replies calling Peter “Satan” it is precisely because Peter’s act is not in accordance with the fulfillment of God’s will.

In other words, Jesus’ intention by saying to Peter “Get behind me Satan” is not to push him away, but to get him back on the right path and facing the right direction. Peter must be “behind Jesus to follow him” and join him in giving up his life for his brothers and sisters. Whoever measures the growth of the Kingdom of God in terms of glory, triumph and applause is not reasoning like God, but applying human criteria. To be the disciple of Christ, indeed, requires us to have a life, a vision of the world, and a way of living which is in accord with Jesus and his Gospel.

For Jesus, whoever wants to be his disciple must renounce himself, take up his cross and follow him. That means that he must consider his own life worthless. In fact, we all know by experience that every good and happiness comes out of suffering and sacrifice as well as our success depends on our hard work and sometimes on many privation we have accepted. Without accepting some sacrifice and renunciation in our lives for the sake of God’s Kingdom, it will be very difficult to be a true disciple of Christ.

That is why it is important to ask ourselves, and each one of us individually, where we stand in our life as a Christian and a follower of Jesus. Today, we learn from St James that “faith without deeds is dead”; it is like an apple tree that never bears fruits. Is not such a tree useless? We are invited to renew our faith, to make it more committed to the service of God and our brothers and sisters. We are called to prove the authenticity of faith through concrete actions that help those in need. Providing food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, shelter to the homeless, etc... these are signs that make Christian testimony alive. What the hungry and naked need are not just a friendly expression of sympathy, but food and clothes.

Let me finish by saying that what can help us give a good testimony to Christ is the answer we give to the question he asks in the Gospel: “Who do you say that I am?” The way we answer this question determines the kind of relationship we can maintain with Jesus and, therefore, our reaction to his invitation to take up our cross and follow him.

Let us not forget that when we consider someone as a friend, this contributes to a good relationship with him, as well as it makes easy to accept what he asks of us. If we do not do so with Christ, it would be very difficult to welcome what he is asking of us. May God help each one of us to give a personal answer to Jesus’ question in today’s Gospel! May we come to bear our daily crosses with him so that they become light! May he enlighten each one of us to understand that our faith has to be proved by acts and not only by words! May God bless you all!



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