

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2008

There exists in my country a very famous musician who wrote a song in which he says: When the sun rises in the sky in the morning, it shines for everybody, but not everybody takes advantage of it in the same way. While in the early morning some rush out with joy for the day ahead, others regret the day, because of the trouble ahead of them. While some are ready to start a joyful day, others dread in suffering and pain the outcome of the day.

This song describes, not a pessimistic view on the human condition, but an expression of the inevitable ups and the downs of human life. In fact, life is beautiful, but it is made up also of sacrifice and difficulties, and sometimes of pain and suffering.

Today's readings invite us to reflect on the reality of our commitments which most of the time involve sacrifice and suffering. In fact, any lasting commitment, even that which provides us regularly joy and happiness, is always a challenge. It is through sacrifice and pain that we come to triumph in our commitments.

In the first reading, Jeremiah complains before God about the outcome of his life. When God called him, he complied with joy and enthusiasm, but all that has become for him a nightmare. Whenever he speaks, his word brings violence and outrage, derision and reproach all the day. He would rather not be a prophet and speak anymore in his name. And yet, all that is now impossible, because the love of God has become in his heart like a burning fire. There is no way out, then, but to accept the sacrifice and keep going.

The idea of suffering is the main concern of Jesus in today's Gospel. In fact, Jesus announces his passion and death to his disciples. He tells them that he must go to Jerusalem in order to suffer, be killed and the third day to be raised. However, this idea does not fit the image the disciples had about the Messiah.

In fact, it was believed in the Jewish society that the Messiah could not suffer or die. In that perspective, when Jesus brought up the question of his death, the disciples were just scandalized. For them, the Messiah was to live eternally and triumph over all his enemies. It is in that context that Peter reacts that such a thing cannot happen to him. He wants to protect Jesus, but by the same token, he tries to take him far from the fulfillment of God's plan.

Jesus qualifies Peter's reaction as a temptation similar to that from Satan: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do". In other words, Peter was proposing to him the same thing as that which the tempter did in the desert. He wants to divert him from the fulfillment of God's plan in his life by embracing the cross.

In that perspective, we can say that Satan is any force or anyone that seeks to divert us from the way of God. Satan is an influence that seeks to make us turn back to our old ways from which we have been set free by the Lord. Satan is any power that tries to make human desires take the place of the divine imperative.

For Jesus, the reality of his life is linked to suffering and passion. He is the Messiah who will take upon himself the sins and suffering of humanity in order to bring salvation to the world. He has to die on the cross for the love of humanity; he cannot escape it, whatever might be the cost to pay.

As it was for Jesus, our Christian life is a constant following in the footsteps of our Savior. If we want to follow Jesus, we should be ready to deny ourselves and take up our cross after him. It is an illusion to think that because we are Disciples of Christ we cannot suffer or be in troubles. Some of the Christian teachings we see on television speak often of “your happiness right now”. With such teachings, we run the risk of thinking that life is always honey. When we meet hardships and difficulties, it does not mean that God has rejected us. Rather, Jesus shares with us the small crosses of our daily life.

That is why, Jesus insists on denying ourselves and taking our cross after him. To deny ourselves means to say no to self, and yes to God. It means also to make God the ruling principle of our life and not our passions and ambitions. We have to lose a little bit of our life in order to win Christ. If we sacrifice nothing of what makes our present life, it would be impossible to have eternal life. It is only when we risk something for the sake of Christ that we can win our life back.

In other words, we cannot hide from ourselves the truth that our commitments, as beautiful as they might be, require sacrifice. Our commitments imply a part of sacrifice and suffering. The cross is part of our life. It can take many forms: perhaps your cross is a difficult relationship with your children, your family, or disease that has become part of your life, or some difficulties of which you cannot get rid, etc.

All that helps us understand the insistence of St Paul in the second reading: Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God and what is pleasing to him. In this process, we have to offer to the Lord our very self, that is, all our being, mind spirit, and body. This is the base of Christian ethics, namely that, because our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, it becomes the instrument through which we have to glorify God. In that sense, true worship is the offering to God of our body as living sacrifice and of all that we do every day. We pray that God gives us the grace to accept the crosses of our lives. We ask him the courage to follow Jesus by denying ourselves until the day we are reunited with him in heaven. God bless you all!

Jeremiah 20, 7-9; Romans 12, 1-2; Matthew 16, 21-27



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