

## **Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2009**

To be a prophet in Israel was a wonderful vocation because the chosen one was seen as the eyes, the mouth and the hands of God for his brothers and sisters. But it was also a difficult mission, because what the prophet had to say was not always welcomed by the people to whom he was sent. For that reason, the prophets have been often persecuted and, sometimes, put to death. All the readings of this Sunday invite us to reflect on the reality of the suffering that awaits those who accept to work for the Lord.

The first reading describes the suffering of Isaiah in the exercise of his mission. Because of God, he is humiliated and persecuted. His enemies laugh at him and insult him. But, the more they do so, the more he remains faithful to God.

What gives Isaiah courage to stay firm in his mission, in spite of suffering, is the awareness of the presence of the Lord in his life. He knows that the Lord, who has made him a prophet, is able to help him in difficult times. He is assured that whatever might happen to him, and whatever might be the intensity of his suffering, God is with him. He is not alone. God will assist him and sustain him because of the righteousness of the cause he is defending.

Unlike the prophet, in our times of trouble and suffering we often give up. We sometimes abandon the Christian principles of life in order to accommodate those who persecute us. Sometimes we complain about God that he does not do anything to save us. We forget, however, that even in the worst of our suffering, we are never alone. God is with us; he shares with us each burden of our life as we try to be faithful to our daily commitments before him. It is God who strengthens us as we struggle in the midst of hardships and problems. It is he who comforts us when we are down. Without him, we are lost and with him we are saved.

The fate of the prophet who has to go through suffering foretells the destiny of Jesus. In fact, Jesus has to go through suffering, rejection and death before he triumphs in the resurrection. But before revealing to his disciples this important part of his life, he wants to know what people say of him.

Unfortunately, the popular rumors and reports cannot come to single out his true identity. That is why he turned to his apostles and asked them what they themselves said about him. In a sudden response, Peter said what he always knew in his heart that Jesus is Christ, the Messiah. As soon as Peter made this discovery, Jesus forbade them to tell anyone.

Why? The reason is that in the Jewish society, it was believed that the Messiah would never suffer or die. He had to live forever and triumph over all the enemies of Israel. The perception Jesus had about the Messiah, however, was totally different. He is a Messiah who has to suffer and die.

In that perspective, when he brought up the question of his death, the disciples found it unacceptable. For them, the Messiah was to live eternally and triumph over all his enemies. It is in that context that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. In other words, Peter wanted to protect Jesus, but by the same token, he was trying 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 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 wanted to divert him from the fulfillment of God's plan in his life by embracing the cross.

All this shows us strangely how the tempter sometimes speaks to us in the voice of a well-meaning friend. As human experience has taught us, we might have decided to do the right thing, but which implies sacrifice. And it happens that a friend tries, with all the best intentions of the world, to stop us. If we listen to him, we certainly play safe, but we miss the opportunity of a right action we would perform for the good of others. That is exactly what Jesus felt in the reaction of Peter.

It is for that reason that he calls him Satan. He tries to divert him from God's plan that has to bring salvation to the world through his death on the cross. On the contrary, Jesus has to die for the salvation of the world. He could not escape this mission.

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 trouble.

That is why Jesus insists that we deny ourselves and take up our cross after him. To deny ourselves means to accept some sacrifice for the sake of God's kingdom. 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.

Our commitments before God and in society 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.

There is no Christian life without denial and sacrifice. It is not just a question of sacrifice for our own sake, but also for the good of our fellow humans. As St James tells us, "faith without deeds is dead". It should be visible by the way we put it into practice. Our actions will always speak more than simple words.

We are, therefore, 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. We pray that the Lord help us consent to some sacrifice in the footsteps of Jesus for our eternal salvation and the welfare of our brothers and sisters. May God bless you all!

**Isaiah 50, 4c-9a; James 2, 14-18; Mark 8, 27-35**



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