

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

The readings of this Sunday talk about the suffering of the servant of the Lord and its meaning with regard to the reality of God's kingdom.

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah laments about his life and his mission. In fact, when God called him, he willingly responded with excitement and enthusiasm. But all that had become a nightmare for him. He had to face constant persecutions and continual oppositions. He had become an object of laughter and his message an occasion for violence and outrage.

However, in a very paradoxical way, the more he wanted to give up and stop being a prophet, the more he felt in his heart something like a burning fire that held him to keep going with his mission.

What is behind this text is the idea that any vocation, as beautiful as it might be, is not only a source of joy and happiness, but also of sacrifice and suffering. In spite of all that suffering, however, if the servant of God remains focused on God, with trust and confidence, God will give him strength and grace to continue fulfilling his duty.

This vocation of the prophet Jeremiah prefigures that of Jesus, as told to us in today's Gospel. First of all, the Gospel starts with this revelation from Jesus that he has to go to Jerusalem, to suffer and to be killed before rising from the dead.

This triple announcement defines not only the ministry of Jesus, but also his destiny as established in God's plan. In fact, according to God's plan, Jesus' life had to finish in Jerusalem, because the fate of any prophet was linked to the holy city and its temple. Jesus had to suffer and to be killed, because the cross was part of the salvation mystery that God wanted to be fulfilled that way. But Jesus had also to rise from the dead as a proof that his teaching, his mission and his life were inspired by God and in conformity with his will.

That is why he did not hesitate to foretell his disciples what would happen to him on the way. And it is here that the problem emerges. In fact, it was good that the disciples had discovered, together with Peter, that Jesus was the Messiah. However, their conception of Messiah was totally different from that of Jesus. For them, the Messiah had to live eternally, to conquer everything and triumph over his enemies. In that perspective, it was misplaced that Jesus was talking about his suffering and death.

It was in that context that Peter reacted energetically in order to stop Jesus. In fact, what Peter was doing was trying to divert him from the way of the cross, which was the fulfillment of the plan of the Father. That is why Jesus called him Satan.

It does not mean that at that time Peter had horns and tail as we sometimes represent Satan. The problem is all about the way of being and behaving that is in total opposition to God's ways. In that sense, we can say that Satan can take many forms and wear different hats. Satan can be a person who seeks to discourage us so that we stop believing in God and follow his commandments. Satan can be a bad influence that tries to turn us away from the right path so that we might do what is contrary to God's will. Satan can be any power that pushes us to make our human desires and duties more important than our obligations vis-à-vis God.

This episode of the altercation between Jesus and Peter is really dramatic, because the temptation at the origin of it comes from someone who sincerely loved Jesus and wanted to preserve him from suffering and death. What this episode teaches us is that the hardest temptation is not that which comes from outside, but rather from the inner circle of close friends and beloved members of our own families. Those people can influence us in a good way, as well as in a bad one.

That is why, it is important to understand that true love is not that which protects people from adventures and risks, but that tries to allow them to give the best of themselves for the ideal that makes their life great. As I say this, I remember a speech I heard from a mother of a slain soldier in combat. She was saying that although she loved her son, she could not prevent him to go into military service. She knew that there was a danger, but she wanted him to put his life at the service of this country for the protection of his fellow countrymen. For that reason, she was proud of her son and of everything she had achieved by giving his life for America.

That is what Jesus wanted to tell Peter. He wanted him to realize that his life is linked to the cross for the salvation of the world. Therefore, anyone willing to be his disciple should walk in his footsteps, deny himself and embrace the cross and not to avoid it.

In concrete, to deny oneself means, not only to dethrone ourselves and to enthrone God, but also to make God the ruling principle of our life and not our passions and ambitions. To take up the cross means to accept the burden of sacrifice, because Christian life is that of sacrifice for the good of others. And as human experience has taught us, in our commitment as Christians, we will often be asked to give a lot, in terms of service, but, in turn, the human reward will sometimes be very small.

In that perspective, we understand why Jesus insists that those who hold on to the secure in their lives now are in danger of losing them. It is only when we risk something for the sake of Christ that we can win our life back. That is why it is important to understand that our commitments in life as Christians, citizen, fathers, mothers, or workers, husbands or wives, imply a part of sacrifice and cross. Whatever might be the form the cross may take, that is, difficult familial relationship, disappointment in life or sickness; it is part of our life and we cannot escape it.

It is only in following Jesus in this path that we can please God, as he did himself. As St Paul says, our following of Jesus should be practical by spiritually offering to God our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to him. Let us, then, pray that God gives us the grace to accept the cross of our lives. Let us 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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