

## **Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012**

The readings of this Sunday talk about the reality of suffering and sacrifice endured for the sake of God's kingdom. They invite us to the awareness of the truth that the service of God implies on our part the acceptance of sacrifice without which our commitment would be vain and our effort empty.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah talks about the servant of the Lord and the fulfillment of his vocation, and his obedience to God in fulfilling it. He shows that in the worst of his suffering, the servant of the Lord did not rebel against God and his will. Instead, he accepted misunderstanding and mistreatment without resisting. He did so, because he knew that God was his help and his consolation. For that reason, what was happening to him from the hands of men could not deter his conviction and his trust. After all, nobody could prove him wrong, because God was his protector and his help.

What is behind this text is the idea that the service of God is not a piece of cake, but warfare. Another idea is the truth that in order to win this warfare, one needs not to be discouraged by the conflicting circumstances in which he works or lives, but rather to be courageous and faithful to his mission and vocation. Such people can always count on God, because not only is God a sure ally, but he is also the one to whom the mission belongs and the one who calls to the vocation. In that perspective, those who toil for God in their vocation are not alone, but with God who sustains them, because of the righteousness of the cause they are defending.

This reading helps us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is asking of us to take our cross and to follow him. First of all, the Gospel says that Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the town of Caesarea. Along the way, he asked his disciples what people said about his identity.

They all reported the rumors about him and how people thought he was John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the prophets. Willing to make sure that the disciples knew the truth about him, he asked what they themselves said about him. At that time, Peter answered on their behalf that he was the Messiah. In turn, Jesus forbade them to tell anyone about it.

Once he said that, he started talking openly to the disciples about his passion, death and resurrection. But Peter, not content with such talk, rebuked him about it. In turn, Jesus rebuked Peter, because his way of thinking was all human and not divine. In the end, he summoned the crowd and his disciples about the importance of bearing the cross and following him, because losing one's life for the sake of the Gospel was really saving it.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing I want to highlight is about the hidden identity of Jesus. In fact, many of the people who were in contact with Jesus had certainly some opinion about him and about his identity. Though they saw many of his miracles and heard his teachings, they could not come to discover his true identity.

That is what transpires in the rumors the disciples report at the question of Jesus' identity. Confronted with such a truth, there was nothing else to do for Jesus than to hear from his own disciples what they thought about him. It was at that time that Peter gave the right response that Jesus was the Christ.

The interesting question here would be that of knowing how, unlike the popular opinion, the disciples were not mistaken on Jesus' identity? It is because their close friendship with Jesus had brought them in such an intimacy with him that, in the end, they had come to know who he truly was. They did not have an opinion of him based on sayings, but on what they had personally experienced by living with him.

I highlight this point in order to bring to our awareness the truth that everything we do in our spirituality in order to deepen our relationship with Jesus is always beneficial to us. All our exercises of devotion, prayers, adoration, help us build a strong relationship with Jesus and bring us close to his heart from where we can know his identity as Messiah.

Even though Peter gave the right answer, something, however, was missing in the assessment of the disciples. They were still caught up in the Jewish popular imagination in which the Messiah would not die or suffer, but rather would triumph over all his enemies. That is the reason why Peter reacted violently to Jesus' speech on his passion and death. But, Jesus immediately corrected him by bringing him on the right path.

The second point I want to bring is about the reality of the cross. The cross is part of our life and there is no way of escaping it. It can take many forms and many faces; but whatever might be its form or face, it remains always what it is, namely something we have to bear and to deal with for the whole of our life. It can appear in the sickness or the illness we have and we want to get rid of without success. It can appear in a broken relationship we try to fix without success. It can appear in the sacrifice we have to accept for the good of those entrusted to us in our vocation. It can appear in the deception or the disappointment of life that plagues our life, etc.

It would be an illusion to think Christian life without the cross. That is why we cannot follow Jesus without being ready to take up our cross after him. In that sense, the cross is our means of connection to Jesus, to his suffering and death. Only after it can we have access to the resurrection. As he did, so shall we do.

Does it mean that because we bear the cross after Jesus, it is easy? No. Given its nature, any cross is heavy, difficult and sometimes annoying. That is why when we have a cross to bear, we have to turn to Jesus and ask his assistance so that we might not be overwhelmed and discouraged. We have always to pray that Jesus may help us to be patient as he was until the day the cross is not anymore on our shoulders. That is the grace we have to ask in this Mass. May God bless you all!

**Isaiah 50: 5-9a; James 2: 14-18; Mark 8: 27-35**



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