

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2015

The readings of this Sunday talk about the reality of suffering and sacrifice. They show that the service of God and the reality of his kingdom cannot go without the cross. They invite us to accept our part of sacrifice for the sake of God's kingdom.

The first reading talks about the suffering of the servant of God and his obedience in fulfilling his vocation. It shows how, instead of rebelling against God's will, he accepted mistreatment without resisting. It also shows the trust he put in God who could save him from the hands of his enemies.

What is behind this text is the idea that the service of God is not a piece of cake, but a real warfare. There is also the idea that, in order to win this warfare, one needs not to be discouraged by the conflicting circumstances in which he works. The last idea is related to the truth that those who count on God will never be disappointed, but rather will be sustained and defended by him.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is asking of us to take up 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 of Philippi. It gives a report on the question that he asked his disciples over what people think of his identity.

Then, it gives the answer Peter gave to the same question on behalf of the twelve as he recognized Jesus as the Messiah. After that, the Gospel gives the forbidding of Jesus to reveal his true identity and the announcement of his passion. The Gospel ends up with Peter's reaction and Jesus' statement about the cross.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today, I want to talk about the importance of the cross. The cross, in fact, is part of our life and there is no way of escaping it. It may 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.

For instance, 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.

That is why it would be an illusion to think of Christian life without the cross. In truth, 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, because it is only by losing our life here on earth that we can win it for eternal life.

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 him for 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.

Because, there is no way of escaping the cross, the identity of Jesus is intimately related with the cross. The people who met him, knew him only from the outside as they

listened to his teachings and witnessed his miracles. They did not come across him profoundly. That is why they thought he was John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. Here, their vision will be different from that of the disciples. Why so? Because unlike those who fail to discover the true identity of Jesus, the disciples will find it.

But, how did it happen that 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 hear-say, but on what they had personally experienced by living with him.

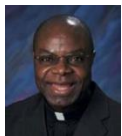
I highlight this point in order to bring to our awareness the truth that everything we do in our spirituality in order to deepen our relationship with Jesus is always beneficial to us. All our exercises of devotion, prayers, adoration, help us build a strong relationship with Jesus and bring us close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

Though Peter gave the right answer in revealing the identity of Jesus, 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 suffer or die. They were locked in the Jewish Messianic triumphalism where the Messiah was believed to triumph over all his enemies. That is the reason why Peter reacted violently to Jesus' statement that the Messiah will suffer greatly and die.

If Jesus corrects him immediately, the reason is that he wants him to realize that it is impossible to be his disciples without taking the part of his cross. In other words, it is only when we accept the cross, like Jesus, that we can share in his life. Any attempt to leave the cross out of our life and vocations is like living in the illusion that we are immune to it. That would lead, in the end, to disappointment and deception because it is part of what it means to be human and a disciple of Jesus.

Because it is so, let us pray, then, that God may help us to take our part of the cross and follow him, with patience, obedience and perseverance. May God bless you all!

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



Homily Date: September 13, 2015

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Document Name: 20150913homily.pdf