

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time C/2016

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of suffering. They show that suffering is at the heart of the life of any servant of God. As suffering was in the life of Jesus, so it is for us. Suffering invites us to embrace the crosses of our life with patience and abnegation.

The first reading talks about the grace God will pour upon his people in order to make them sensitive to the suffering of his servant. It also shows that from that suffering, his people will find a purification from their sins and uncleanness.

What is behind this text is the idea that God wants his people to be purified from their sins. Another idea is the truth that God attains that goal through the mediation of his servant.

This text allows us to understand today's Gospel as Jesus invites his disciples to take up their cross and to follow him. First of all, the Gospel starts with the question of Jesus to his disciples about his identity. Then, it gives different opinions about what people think of Jesus. After that, the Gospel gives Peter's response about Jesus' identity by revealing that he is the Messiah.

The Gospel ends up with Jesus revealing the importance of the cross in his life and the invitation to his disciples to accept the cross after him.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the identity of Jesus as inseparable from the cross. What do I mean by that? Let me explain. In fact, when Jesus started his ministry, he was admired by the crowd and he attracted many people to him.

But, in spite of this admiration, there was a question: What was the motivation of his followers? Did they do it by curiosity or by conviction? Were they touched by his teaching or just by his miracles? Moreover, did they really understand who he was?

It was in that context that Jesus asked the question of what people thought of him. Unfortunately, their opinions were wrong by thinking that he was John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets until Peter responded that he was the Christ of God.

An interesting question here would be this: Why did the people get it wrong and not the disciples? I believe that it is because their close friendship with Jesus brought them in such an intimacy with him that eventually they discovered who he truly was. They did not have an opinion of him based on sayings or appearances, but on what they personally experienced by living with him.

Why do I highlight this point? I do it in order to bring to our awareness the fact that everything we do in our spiritual life in order to deepen our relationship with Jesus is always worthwhile. That is why we have to take seriously our devotions and prayers, as well as all types of spiritual exercises as a process that allows us to build a strong relationship with Jesus and come close to him.

While the apostles came to tell the true identity of Jesus, it is curious that soon after that, he prohibited them from revealing it to people. Why did he do so? Well, in order to understand this interdiction from Jesus, we have to know that there were in Israel at that time diverse conflicting conceptions about the Messiah.

First, there was the political Messianism. This was an opinion that held that the Messiah would be a political figure that would operate a political revolution by triumphing over Israel's enemies and liberating the country. Second, there was the spiritual Messianism. This was an opinion that held that the Messiah would operate a spiritual revolution by bringing all the people to the conversion of heart and the renunciation of sins. In both cases, the Messiah was conceived as triumphant over sufferings and death.

Unlike those opinions, Jesus had to go through suffering, passion and death. In that sense, it was normal that he prohibited the disciples to tell anyone because they were not prepared to accept the idea of a suffering Messiah. It is for that reason also he told them about the fate waiting for him, namely his passion, death and resurrection. In other words, he was preparing them for the reality to come about his life.

Because that was his fate, it was also the fate of those believing in him. That is why he told the disciples that anyone willing to come after him should take up his cross and follow him. In that sense, the cross is part of our life as disciples of Jesus. There is no way of imagining being Christians without the cross. To do the contrary would be living with an illusion about the reality of suffering and our life.

The cross, indeed, can take many forms or faces. But, whatever might be its form or face, it remains always unpleasant, heavy, a burden, something that sometimes we have to bear and to deal with for the whole of our life.

The cross can be a sickness or illness we want to get rid of, but without success. It can be a broken relationship we try to fix, but without succeeding. It can be a sacrifice to endure for the sake of our kids or our family. It can be a deception, a disappointment or a betrayal that plagues our life. To be fair, let me say that it would be an illusion to think of 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, death and resurrection. Only after the suffering can we have access to the resurrection. As it happened to Jesus, so it will happen to us.

Does it mean that because the cross is borne after Jesus, then, it is easy? No; in its nature, a cross is always annoying. That is why when we have a cross, we have to turn to Jesus and ask his assistance so that we are not overwhelmed and discouraged. We have to pray that he helps us to be patient as he was until the cross is no more on our shoulders.

The question Jesus asked his disciples about his identity is a test question to each one of us. Each has to answer it with the knowledge in mind that it involves the reality of suffering. Therefore, to be a disciple implies an acceptance of suffering. May Jesus give us the grace to bear our cross with patience at his example!

Zechariah 12: 10-11, 13: 1; Galatians 3: 26-29; Luke 9: 18-24



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