

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2017

The readings of this Sunday talk about the sufferings of the servant of God. They show that anyone who wants to serve God has to be ready in accepting suffering for the sake of God's kingdom. They invite us to accept our part of suffering in the footsteps of Jesus.

The first reading describes the sufferings of the prophet Jeremiah. It shows how, though he enthusiastically accepted the call from God, his profession, however, brought him laughter, derision and reproach from people. It equally shows his courage in keeping working for God instead of giving up his mission.

What is behind this text is the idea that any vocation, as beautiful as it might be, is a mix of joy and pain, happiness and suffering. There is also the idea that the joy of serving the Lord is bigger than the pain endured for his sake. The last idea is the truth that the key to success at service of God is perseverance and faithfulness in spite of the suffering endured.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is talking to his disciples about his passion and death. First of all, the Gospel reminds of the speech of Jesus to his disciples about his passion and death. The Gospel talks also about Jesus' prediction of his resurrection that had to follow his passion.

Then, it gives the reaction of Peter who tried to prevent Jesus from undergoing such atrocity. It gives also the reaction of Jesus to Peter's injection by showing how his consideration was human and from Satan and not from God.

After that, the Gospel speaks of Jesus' invitation to his disciples to deny themselves, to take up their cross and follow him. Then, it gives the words of Jesus saying that whoever wishes to save his life will lose it and whoever wishes to lose his life for his sake, will find it. The Gospel finishes with Jesus' admonition over the risk of gaining the whole world while forfeiting one's life. Finally, the Gospel ends with Jesus' talk about the final judgment and the reward that each will receive according to his conduct.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the value of sacrifice and suffering. In fact, human experience has shown that no success in life is obtained at cheap cost and any durable endeavor requires effort, sacrifice and pain. Let us call that a common sense philosophy. Of course, life is beautiful, made up of joys and lovely roses; but each rose tree has also its thorns. That common sense philosophy is what American people read in the sayings: "No pain, no gain".

Though this common sense philosophy is well known, the truth however, is that it is naturally difficult to accept suffering. Moreover, there is in each one of us an aversion to pain and sacrifice. If, in fact, we were given to choose between a life with pain and suffering and a life without pain and suffering, I believe we would all choose that one without pain or suffering.

Sometimes we have heard people confronted with terminal illness say: "I know that I am going to die, but I am in no rush", or "I know that when I am going to die, I will go to heaven, but I do not want to go now". Such words are an expression of another truth,

namely that in each of us, there is a real fear of confronting suffering and pain. There is a natural inclination to avoid pain and suffering. No one, in fact, would like to confront the cross, because it is painful and excruciating.

That helps us understand why Peter reacted negatively to Jesus' announcement of his passion and death. By rebuking Peter, Jesus wants to tell us that the reality of the cross is inevitable and inescapable. Physically and spiritually speaking, this is true, because it is impossible to live without the cross. It is part of our life and we have to make it part of our life. To ignore this reality is to live in sheer illusion, like someone longing to live in a castle of ivory.

Whatever might be the form through which the cross comes to us, it is always a burden. It could be a broken relationship with the family, the children or the spouse; a difficult marriage; a financial problem; a disease that has become part of our life, or some other difficulties of which we cannot get rid of, etc. For Jesus, indeed, it is only when we accept to confront the cross as part of our life that we can find the way to be set free. If we try to run away, we do not resolve the problem, because the cross is everywhere. If we accept the cross, we will conform our life with his.

Therefore, as he went through the cross before rising from the dead, we too create the conditions of our resurrection through the acceptance of our cross. That is why Jesus insists that whoever would like to become his disciple must deny himself, take up his cross and follow him.

In those words of Jesus, there is no denial of the burden of the cross or its ugliness or its discomfort. The secret of the liberating power of the cross lies in this, that the burden it carries is not terminal, but paschal. That means that the burden of the cross does not kill us; instead it conforms us with the life of Jesus so that when we stay faithful to the end, in spite of our cross, we will reign with Jesus.

In that sense, any flight from the cross for any reason or another is a loss for us. Our salvation is in our faithfulness, but it is a faithfulness that includes the cross. That is why we have to accept to sacrifice for the sake of God's kingdom and for the sake of our eternal salvation.

As Jesus himself says, it does not serve us to gain the whole world while losing our own life, which ultimately includes eternal life. Is it easy to live all this teaching of Jesus? I do not think so. And yet, it is what we have to do, knowing well that we will be repaid in as much as we have been faithful to our cross. Let us pray that Jesus may give us the courage to bear our cross without being crushed by its burden. May God bless you all!

Jeremiah 20: 7-9; Romans 12: 1-2; Matthew 16: 21-27

Homily Date: September 03, 2017
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20170903homily.pdf