

## Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time A2023

Human experience has taught us that no success in life is obtained at cheap cost. No durable enterprise can be prosperous without effort, hard work, sacrifice and pain. That is what the common sense philosophy teaches us. For sure, life is beautiful and amusing; it is made up of joys and lovely roses; but each rose tree has also its thorns. That is what the popular wisdom renders in words like, "No pain, no gain".

The prophet Jeremiah, many years before our Lord, experienced the paradox of human life with its mixture of joys and pain. When God called him, he responded with enthusiasm and excitement. But, it did not take too long for all that to turn into nightmare for him. He had to face constant persecution and continual opposition. Because of God, he had become an object of laughter and his message an occasion for violence and outrage.

Though the common sense philosophy, which holds that life is a mixture of joys and pain, is well known, it is naturally difficult to many people to accept the reality of suffering. Moreover, there is in each one of us an aversion to pain and sacrifice. If 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.

As we have heard it said many times when people are confronted with terminal illness: "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 right now". Such words are an expression of a 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 our Lord's announcement of his passion and death. For our Lord, it was God's plan that he had to finish his life in Jerusalem, for the fate of any prophet was linked to the holy city and the temple. Peter and the other apostles did not agree with our Lord, because their conception of Messiah was different from his. For them, the Messiah had to live eternally, to conquer victories and triumph over his enemies.

In that context, the best thing to do for Peter was to stop our Lord from going to Jerusalem. What Peter was doing, in truth, was trying to divert our Lord from the way of the cross, which was the fulfillment of the Father's plan. That is why Jesus called him Satan.

It does not mean that at that time Peter had horns and tail as we sometimes represent the Devil. The problem here is about the way of being and behaving that is in total opposition to God's ways. 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 do what is contrary to God's will. Satan can be an impulse or an internal drive that pushes us to bring unrest and conflicts around us. Satan can be any power that pushes us to make our human desires or emotions more important than our obligations vis-à-vis God.

The altercation between our Lord and Peter is really dramatic, because the temptation it suggests comes from someone who sincerely loves him and wanted to preserve him from suffering and death. That altercation teaches us that the hardest temptation is not always that comes from outside, but rather from the inner circle of close friends and family members. Those people can influence us in good or bad way.

By rebuking Peter, our Lord wants to tell us that the reality of the cross is inescapable. It is impossible to live without the cross. His own life is linked to the cross for the salvation of the world. The cross is 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 our Lord, 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 possibility of our resurrection through the acceptance of our cross.

That is why our Lord insists that whoever would like to become his disciple must deny himself, take up his cross and follow him. To take up the cross means to accept the burden of sacrifice that comes with it for the sake of our salvation.

The cross has a liberating power for it leads us to the resurrection as it did for our Lord himself. Those who flee the cross and hold on to their lives now are in danger of losing them. It is only when we risk our lives for the sake of Christ that we can win them back. Our salvation is in our faithfulness, but it is a faithfulness that includes the cross. We have to accept to sacrifice for the sake of God's kingdom and for the sake of our eternal salvation. So, as our Lord says again, it does not serve us to gain the whole world while losing our own life, which ultimately includes eternal life. We will be repaid in as much as we have been faithful to our cross.

Let us pray that our Lord may give us the courage to bear our cross without being crushed by its burden. Let us ask him the grace to follow him by denying ourselves until the day we will be reunited with him in heaven. May God bless you all!

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



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