

TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B2024

To be a prophet in Israel was a great honor and a wonderful vocation. The prophet was very often seen as the eyes, the hands and the mouth of God in the midst of his people. But, to be a prophet was also a difficult task, because what he had to say was not always welcomed by the people. Sometimes, his words could get him into troubles to the point of being persecuted or put to death.

That is what happened to Isaiah as we heard in the first reading. He was suffering in the exercise of his mission as a prophet. Because of God, he was humiliated and persecuted. His enemies laughed at him and insulted him. But, the more they did so, the more he remained faithful to God.

What gave Isaiah courage to stay firm in his mission, in spite of suffering, was the awareness of the presence of God in his life. He knew that God, who made him a prophet, was also able to help him in difficult times. He was assured that whatever might happen to him, and whatever might be the intensity of his suffering, God was with him. He was not alone. God would assist him and sustain him because of the righteousness of the cause he was defending.

The fate of the prophet as described here foretells the fate of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord had to go through suffering, rejection and death before triumphing in the resurrection. But, before revealing to his disciples this important part of his life, he wanted to know what people thought of him.

Unfortunately, the popular rumors and reports of people could not come to single out his true identity. That is why our Lord turned to his apostles and asked them what they themselves said about him. In a sudden response, Peter said what he always knew in his heart that Jesus was Christ, the Messiah. As soon as Peter made this discovery, our Lord forbade them to tell anyone.

Why? The reason is that in the Jewish society, it was believed that the Messiah would never suffer or die. He had to live forever and triumph over all the enemies of Israel. And yet, the perception our Lord had about the Messiah was totally different. For sure, he is the Messiah, but a Messiah who had to suffer and die.

Once he brought up the question of his suffering and death, the disciples found it unacceptable. For them, the Messiah was to live eternally and triumph over all his enemies. It is in that context that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. In other words, Peter wanted to protect Jesus, but by the same token, he was trying to take him far from the fulfillment of God's plan in his life.

Our Lord qualified Peter's reaction as a temptation similar to that from Satan: "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do". In other words, Peter was proposing to him the same thing as that which the tempter did in the desert. He wanted to divert him from the fulfillment of God's plan in embracing the cross.

All this shows us how strangely the tempter sometimes speaks to us in the voice of a well-meaning friend. As human experience has taught us, we might have decided to do the right thing, but which implies sacrifice. And it happens that a friend tries, with all the best intentions of the world, to stop us. If we listen to him, we certainly play safe, but we miss the opportunity of a right action we would perform for the good of others. That is exactly what our Lord felt in the reaction of Peter.

It is for that reason that he calls him Satan. He tries to divert him from God's plan that has to bring salvation to the world through his death on the cross. On the contrary, our Lord had to die for the salvation of the world. He could not escape that mission.

As it was for our Lord, our Christian life is a constant following in the footsteps of our Savior. If we want to follow our Lord, we should be ready to deny ourselves and take up our cross after him. It is an illusion to think that because we are Disciples of Christ we cannot suffer or be in trouble.

That is why our Lord insists that we deny ourselves and take up our cross after him. To deny ourselves means to accept sacrifices for the sake of God's kingdom. We have to lose a little bit of our life in order to win Christ. If we sacrifice nothing of what makes our present life, it would be impossible to have eternal life. It is only when we risk something for the sake of Christ that we can win our life back. Our commitments before God and in society imply a part of sacrifice and suffering.

The cross is part of our life. It can take many forms: perhaps your cross is a difficult relationship with your children, the members of family, or a disease that has become part of your life, or some difficulties of which you cannot get rid, etc.

There is no Christian life without denial and sacrifice. It is not just a question of sacrifice for our own sake, but also for the good of our fellow humans. As St James tells us, "faith without deeds is dead". It should be visible by the way we put it into practice. Our actions will always speak louder than simple words.

We are, therefore, invited to renew our faith, to make it more committed to the service of God and our brothers and sisters. We are called to prove the authenticity of our faith through concrete actions that help those in need. Providing food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, shelter to the homeless, etc... These are signs that make Christian testimony alive. What the hungry and naked need are not just a friendly expression of sympathy, but food and clothes. We pray that God help us accept some sacrifice in the footsteps of our Lord for our eternal salvation and the welfare of our brothers and sisters.

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



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