

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 16:21-27

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you". But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things".

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

REFLECTION 1: TAKE UP YOUR 'TAU'

Hans Wolff, a renowned biblical scholar taught that prophets are people who provide us with the future implications of our present actions. Biblical prophets constantly remind their listeners to 'return to Yahweh (God)' – in other words to relate to the Lord and not to institutions, nor to a set of rules and regulations or to an authority structure. God's people are expected to walk step by step with the Holy One: the essential force in their daily lives. Prophets must first prophecy to themselves. The one who delivers God's word must be the first to listen to God's word. In the case of Jeremiah (First Reading) he didn't ask people to do something he hadn't done himself: return to Yahweh. But the person to whom he returned didn't offer him a lot of hope or consolation – 'insult, derision all day long (Jer 20:8). Though delivering God's word brings the prophet tremendous pain and woe, not delivering it brings even more pain and woe. He's trapped!

Though Jesus never pushes the theological envelope anywhere near Jeremiah's imagery he often reminds his followers that those who plan on rising with him must first die with him. But how, we may ask, does a Christian actually die with Jesus? We surely are not to seek a literal crucifixion? So there must be other ways that we imitate his sacrificial love.

Matthew revealed his teaching on the subject around three predictions of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. After each prediction, one or a number of Jesus' disciples say or do something to demonstrate that they don't understand the necessity of Jesus' dying. In today's Gospel, Peter strongly objects to the prediction of Jesus' passion. Jesus corrects his misguided faith by clarifying how he expects someone to die with him. Jesus corrects Peter's no-pain version of Christianity not only with 'Get behind me Satan' but with an oft-quoted statement, 'those who wish to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me'. Scholars point out that taking up one's cross would have meant nothing to anyone before Jesus historically took up his own cross. Some suggest that what Jesus actually meant by taking up the cross was that they must take up their 'tau' and follow him. The tau- T – is the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. So that when a person wanted to say that he/she had done something completely, they used the expression: 'I did it from aleph to tau' (just as we might say I did it from a to z) or 'I did it to the tau'.

So when this Galilean carpenter called on his followers to carry their tau, he was telling them to be completely open to whatever God wanted them to do, to make God present and working in their lives – the centre of their existence. He is echoing Jeremiah's demand to cut through their entanglements and return to God. So, carrying one's cross didn't originally refer to publicly enduring some dramatic moment of suffering. Rather it described an ongoing generous, and open relationship with God – a daily quest to

discover what God wishes of us during this specific day. Such a quest as we know can often mean a real death to one's ego – a real sacrifice.

REFLECTION 2:

PETER DEVASTATED

In to-day's Gospel, Jesus shows the disciples that while it might be nice for him continuing to pray, teach and heal, he must instead go to Jerusalem and be killed. Jesus is called to trespass against the conventions of the day in order to bring new life to all humankind. The prediction of Jesus' death was such a blow to the twelve that they scarcely even listened to what Jesus had to say about rising on the third day. Peter got it into his head that suffering and death were wrong for Jesus, inwardly rebelling against the apparent cruelty of the divine plan. So Peter thought he would cheer Jesus up by saying; 'may you be spared master, God forbid that such a thing should ever happen to you'.

To Peter's astonishment Jesus exploded with a violence rarely seen in the Gospels. He said, 'Get out of my sight, you Satan, you are trying to make me trip and fall'. Peter, who a while ago (cf B.C. 388) was called a rock, solid enough for Jesus to build his Church on, is now treated as an obstacle – a stumbling block in the path of the Messiah. The path of suffering and death wasn't easy for Jesus to accept and Peter wasn't making it anyway lighter by his well-intentioned comments. Jesus summarised Peter's whole problem in one sentence; 'You are not judging by God's standards but by human standards', (like, 'take care', 'don't overdo it'). God was demonstrating in Jesus that real happiness comes through suffering, true joy through sorrow and everlasting life through death.

The Christian cannot eliminate the cross of salvation from his or her life no more than Jesus could. It is not as if God were looking down from heaven and took some kind of twisted pleasure in what he sees. Nor is it some kind of idea of payment for sin, in the old concept of 'an eye for an eye' and 'the sins of the fathers being visited upon their children'. The mystery of suffering boils down to a test of love, of being willing to suffer for another, because we love that person so much. So we accept suffering in trust and confidence as Jesus did. That involves every kind of suffering, not just the physical kind, but also all the mental and emotional anguish, the frustration, the loneliness, the boredom of human existence. Accept it all we must, but we need not be surprised if that acceptance is a struggle as it was for Jesus. As we look at the crucifix, we remember that Jesus tells us to take up our cross. We could be tempted to say like Peter, 'may I be spared, Lord, God forbid that any such thing could ever happen to me!' One must not save one's life as one would save a treasure, but as one who would lose a treasure by spending it.