

## **Twenty Second Sunday of the Year September 03, 2017**

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

To be a Christian, to be on the journey of discipleship, is to have our life changed, to be led in unexpected ways. Sometimes it is in ways we would rather not go as our cross is heavy and painful. Sometimes we are called to carry the cross of being hurt by others. At times we look for life of false expectations, life of illusions that is free from all pain and sufferings. If as Christians we are to seek Jesus or the church or the faith only because we are seeking self-satisfaction, or because we want a solution to our problems, we are going to be sadly disappointed. That is the time we look towards Jesus for strength to carry the cross given to us and walk with him. However, we are sure to encounter God in the midst of pain and everything is bound to change. But the cross will be with us. In the Gospel of today Jesus teaches the disciples regarding the suffering Messiah who will suffer, die and rise again. Peter could not understand why Jesus must suffer and die and tries to admonish him. He receives the reprimand from Jesus and also receives the correct teaching about the cross. Jesus tells his disciples that they have to deny themselves, carry the cross and follow him to be his followers. In the first reading Jeremiah complains about his difficulties as a prophet and the pain he experienced to speak in God's name. Here we have the reflection on the role of a prophet, who has to speak the truth even if it makes him unpopular. In the second reading Paul outlines a plan for a spiritual life that will please our merciful God. The apostle urges the Christian community to dedicate their lives to God and offer themselves as a sacrifice to him.

Today's First Reading reveals the Prophet's inner struggle especially his feelings about his service to God. In this passage we heard prophet Jeremiah experiencing that inner battle between the spiritual and the worldly ways. Choosing to embrace the worldly way rather than the will of God, he made a fool of Himself. The Lord God was telling Jeremiah how to embrace the spiritual way, but Jeremiah would not listen. Jeremiah firmly believed that God has manipulated him. He feels as if God deceived him when he called him to be a prophet. He complains that his message is always negative, warning the people of violence in store for them. For his efforts Jeremiah endured derision and reproach. They laughed at him as none of his threats remained fulfilled. He seeks an escape and even decides not to speak any more about God. But Jeremiah's plan does not work. He must speak God's word even though he would prefer not to. He

describes the feeling as a fire burning deep inside him. Deep down Jeremiah knows his personal preferences must yield to the greater good of speaking the truth. If Jeremiah does not proclaim God's word, the Kingdom will never be challenged to move beyond the lies and falsehoods they believe will give them the security they so much desire. The Prophet knows that their security lies in God alone and therefore he has to speak. If King and court do not listen, they have themselves to blame for the consequences that will inevitably follow.

In the second reading Paul, having reminded the Romans of the mercies God has shown them, begs them to prove themselves generous in their self-giving to God. Paul refers to God's generous and never failing love as source of all good a Christian does. He invites them to offer themselves as living victims, by living their daily lives in God's love and grace. They are to live as true Christians, that is, their daily lives must conform to the will of God. The prime motive of all their actions must ever be the honour and glory of God. Because God accepts our offering, this makes our Christian lives good and acceptable and perfect in his sight. Further Paul says that God does not forbid to possess and to use the goods of this world. He has placed them there precisely for our use. It is the abuse and not the lawful use of this world's goods that is wrong. Paul advises the Romans that it is God's will for all Christians that they should always remember to be dedicated to his service by their baptism. They are destined for heaven and they will reach their destination by justly and honestly using the things of this life as means to that end and not as ends in themselves. We can sum up the good Christian life as Jesus did, says St Paul. It is to love God and to love one's neighbor. Paul uses different words to express the same idea when he tells them to offer themselves as spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God.

The Gospel passage tells us that immediately after the confession of Peter that Jesus is the promised Messiah, Jesus starts speaking openly about his death. He tells them that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day. The Lord tells them that even though he is the Messiah and the very fact that he is the messiah he has to undergo humiliations, suffering and violent death at the hands of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. With his coming back to life from the dead on the third day will make the victory of the Jewish authorities short lived. This is the first passion prediction given in the Gospel of Matthew. By this time the disciples had grasped the fact that Jesus was

God's messiah but they had not grasped what it really meant. Their idea of a messiah was a conquering messiah, a warrior king, who would sweep the Romans from Palestine and lead Israel to power. Hence when Jesus tells them of his sufferings and death, this undoubtedly comes as a terrible shock and was not part of the scenario for the coming of the Messiah. What is worse, the agents of Jesus' humiliation and death will not be some hostile outsiders but the leaders and most distinguished people of their own community. Furthermore, it would happen in Jerusalem, the holy city, the site of the Temple where God dwelt among his people. There is no reason given here as why this must happen. What is surprising is Peter's reaction to the prediction of Jesus. Apparently Peter's understanding of Jesus as Messiah and the son of the living God does not include him being killed.

Matthew tells us that Peter rebuked Jesus for saying this. He took Jesus aside and said: "Heaven preserve you, Lord. This must not happen to you." How this could happen to the Messiah-King of Israel. Peter's strong response is understandable given the traditional characteristics associated with the coming Messiah. No one would be able to comprehend a messiah who would die. Having already given a divinely inspired response about the identity of Jesus, Peter now gives a fully emotional human response and he was also speaking on behalf of his companions. His love for his master is such that he cannot bear him suffering and die a humiliating death. The disciples looked on Christ as a man with divine power, but sent to set up a new kingdom of David which would overcome all enemies. They could not understand the spiritual nature of his kingdom. Therefore Peter vehemently opposed this prediction about Jesus. He was confronting Jesus and advising him to move away from the cross which the Father had planned for him. The angry reaction of Jesus must have come as somewhat unexpected, to say the least. Turning to face Peter, Jesus says: "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus' response to Peter in language that indicates Peter has aligned himself more with Satan than with Jesus. Satan literally means the adversary and in this case it is someone who influences him to move away from the divine ways. Just as when Satan tempted Jesus to prove he was the Son of God, so now Peter seems to be attempting to divert the divine mission of Jesus of suffering and death.

Jesus makes it clear that he is going to the cross and the disciples must be willing to follow. Peter's fault was that he could not yet think as an authentic disciple of

Jesus. He still thinks as an ordinary human person. Thus Jesus' rebuke to Peter is sharp and points out how far he has missed the mark on this issue. Peter, who previously granted divine knowledge, is now relegated to the opposite camp. It does matter that Peter has been declared the Rock by Jesus. Nor does it matter he has been declared the foundation of the Church. Peter's human nature has not been altered even by the special status he received. There is a lesson for all of us to learn here. Peter does not lose his special status among the disciples nor is he stripped of his commission of rock and foundation of the church, but he has to exercise all this in and through his humanity. He is granted the divine commission but he is not granted the divine nature. Matthew is particular that the church leaders to pay careful heed to the experience of Peter. Jesus counters Peter with a corrective teaching. Here Jesus expresses the parabolic nature of discipleship. If it happens to the Master, so will it be the experience of the disciple. One gains one's life by losing it. Ultimate life is attained only by going through suffering and death. At the heart of this teaching is the total redefinition of the meaning of life and how one gets access to it. The traditional ways of power, domination, wealth, prestige and influence are to be shunned. The way to life is found in the way of the cross which ends not in death and defeat but in new life, glorification and exaltation.

Jesus follows up his exchange with Peter by giving corrective teaching on what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship is not about achieving success, greatness or status. Those provide only a false sense of security and cannot give real life. It is only when we get rid of our false life that we discover our real life which is not centred in self but in God. This teaching is parabolic meaning that it is about reversal. We gain life by losing life as Jesus explains about the grain of seed that falls into the ground to give life. Suffering and death lead to life and glorification. His instructions are very clear: a disciple must imitate Jesus and be ready to suffer any hardship for him. If we think as human persons, then we conclude that none of these will make sense. This is the way Peter was thinking and this is the way the disciples thought. We must learn to think like Jesus because he is our saviour, the son of the living God. His way of the cross will teach us the way to life. If we look at the disciples of Jesus, they must have been totally shocked when he told them to deny themselves, take up the cross and follow the master, staying faithfully close to him. They would have wondered of the reaction they would get if they preached against gaining the world and forfeiting eternal life. Yet Jesus tells us that all that the world has to offer is nothing in comparison with the

eternal life he offers. Jesus invites us to be his prophets in the world of today by denying ourselves and seeking his ways.

This passage indeed presents to us the dominant and ever recurring themes of Jesus' teaching. Again and again he confronts them with challenges of Christian life. There are three things which a disciple must be prepared to do. First, he must deny himself. Normally when we say deny we understand self-denial to give up something, a part we use. For Jesus to deny oneself means in every moment of our life to say no to self and yes to God. To deny one's own self means once and for all to dethrone self and enthrone God and make him the dominant principle of our life. Secondly Jesus tells the disciple to take up his cross, for which Luke in his Gospel adds daily. This means that he must take up the burden of sacrifice. A Christian life is a life of sacrificial service. He must abandon his personal ambition in order to serve Christ. He will have to sacrifice his time and leisure for him. It means that one has to be constantly aware of the demands of God and needs of others. He must accept the pains and difficulties for Christ. Finally, he must follow Jesus Christ. That is to say, he must render Jesus perfect obedience.

Our Christian life is a constant following of our Leader, a constant obedience in thought, word and action to Jesus. He walks in the footsteps of Christ and go wherever he leads him. To this Jesus adds that the person who plays for safety loses his life. Perhaps Matthew referred to the early church and the martyrdom. But he advises that the person who risks his life to find Jesus will discover him always and find life. Jesus gives the warning too that if a man has lost his real life because of his desire for security and material things, there is no price he can pay to get it back again. Our only possible gift Christ will be our whole life. Thus our today's Gospel takes us further than just asking us to understand why the glory of Jesus our King and Lord was to be found in the way through suffering and the shameful death of the Cross. There is a further call for us to walk the same road with Jesus. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me." Jesus is asking each one of us to dedicate our lives in totally loving and serving others even if, at times, this involves misunderstanding, ridicule, pain and even death itself. It is rather to let go of oneself so that one can really find oneself.

As a kid, she remembered he mom always liked to make breakfast food for dinner every now and then. And it so happened one night after a long, hard day at work

her mom placed a plate of eggs, sausage and extremely burned biscuits in front of her dad. The kid remembered waiting to see if anyone noticed. Yet all her dad did was reach for his biscuit, smile at her mom and asked the little girl how her day was at school. She did not remember what she told him that night, but did remember watching him smear butter and jelly on that biscuit and eat every bite. When she got up from the table that evening, she remembered hearing her mom apologize to her dad for burning the biscuits. And the kid says she never forgot what he said: "Honey, I love burned biscuits." Later that night, the kid went to kiss Daddy good night and she asked him if he really liked his biscuits burned. He wrapped her in his arms and said, "Your Momma put in a hard day at work today and she's real tired. And besides - a little burnt biscuit never hurt anyone!" Life is full of imperfect things....and imperfect people. We are not the best at hardly anything, and we forget birthdays and anniversaries just like everyone else. But what we have learned over the years is that learning to accept each other's faults - and choosing to celebrate each other's differences - is one of the most important keys to creating a healthy, growing, and lasting relationship. And that's my prayer for you today. That you will learn to take the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of your life and lay them at the feet of God. We could extend this to any relationship. In fact, understanding is the base of any relationship, be it a husband-wife or parent-child or brother-sister or friendship! "Don't put the key to your happiness in someone else's pocket - keep it in your own."

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