

Twelfth Sunday of the Year June 19, 2016

Zechariah 12:10-11; Galatians 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24

The virtue of faith and the necessity of faith is the dominating theme of today's readings. Faith is our personal response to a God who continues to reveal himself to us and invites us to recognize his holiness and beauty. Bible shows us the ways in which God reveals himself to human persons and invites him to respond in faith. Every situation in the world presents a very great contrast between human powerlessness in the face of sickness and death on the one hand, and the striking force of faith on the other. We are in a constant relationship with a God of wonder who transforms us, heals us and removes our pains and transforms them into joy. Faith works miracles and there are the thousands of small miracles that no-one notices them except those concerned. Both Luke and Paul, as we reflect in today's readings, for all their differences of emphasis, share the same faith and understanding of Jesus. Both of them see the continuity from cross to resurrection, and both of them look back through the resurrection to see the cross. When Luke focuses on Jesus' coming Passion, he does so in resurrection light, affirming that Jesus is, as Peter says, "the Messiah of God." When Paul emphasizes that we are heirs according to the promise, he does so on the basis that we are baptized into Christ, which means as he has already explained that we have been crucified with Christ, and as he wrote to the Romans that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death. The word of God today speaks about sacrifice and promise, losing one's life and being saved by the Crucified One.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Zechariah is prophetic in nature. During the prophet's time, the people of Israel had returned from exile. Soon they were to build a Temple to replace the Temple built by Solomon which was destroyed sixty years ago by the Babylonians. Zechariah gives them the message that external display of faith is not sufficient; instead they must turn their hearts to God and they must have the inner repentance. The Prophet is confident that the initiative for conversion will come from God. God will give them the spirit of grace and petition. Their repentance will be sincere and will be exhibited by a profound mourning. Such sincere repentance will be the first step towards forgiveness and restoration. He says that the waters of the fountain will cleanse their sins. This reading looks forward to the day such an inner transformation would come about. Seven hundred and fifty years before its fulfilment, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophet Zechariah foretold the suffering of Messiah in Jerusalem and the mourning of many for the One that they loved so much. Sincere repentance is the first step towards forgiveness and repentance. This prophecy also foretold that the promised Messiah would be a descendant of King David.

Paul in the second reading reminds us as he did to the Christian Community of Galatia that through the Sacrament of Baptism that we have become children of God. Faith and Baptism make people in a special way the chosen children of God. Clothed in Christ Jesus all appear before the Father enjoying the privileges as children of God's family. Our adoption in the Divine family echoes that we are the spiritual descendents of Abraham. He was the first believer and we are called upon to be among the endless number of believers who have embraced God through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul tells us that as a body without a spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. It is insufficient to just have faith in Jesus without putting it into practice. Christ commanded us to work to build our faith in him through the instrument of the church.

Saint Paul again tells us to clothe ourselves with Christ meaning to live as Jesus lived, to obey God's Commands, to be faithful to his teachings and to live holy lives by loving one another as Christ loved us. So great was the love of Jesus that He laid down His life for each and every one of us. Paul expands his thought saying that if Christ identifies with all believers then all are equal as there is racial, social, or sexual difference before God. Before the sight of God we are his equals.

Let us now move to the Gospel scene. We encounter Jesus in the region of Caesarea Philippi, in the north of Palestine, near the source of the Jordan. He was preaching the reign of God, he healed the sick; he multiplied loaves twice already to feed a large crowd. After this he retired to a quiet place a little out of the way. He stood back, or rather, he invited his disciples to stand back a little and he tried to make them think about the situation in which they had found themselves. The Gospel scene opens with Jesus praying alone. The Gospel of Luke often presents Jesus as praying before all the important events of his life. Prayer is a significant theme of this Gospel. Perhaps we wonder why Jesus, the Son of God needed prayer and had to pray. For Jesus prayer primarily was the means necessary to be in constant communication with God. Prayer in reality involves both listening and speaking. In some of the deepest forms of prayer, nothing at all is said but the person is bathed in the all-surrounding presence of God. It is very clear that Jesus often prayed to his Father and he needed the prayer for his mission. He was very concerned that he be always in perfect harmony with what his Father wanted. He had to search and discover the will of God in his life. When people wanted to make him king, he fled to the hills to be alone and to pray. His prayer was a form of intercession, a prayer of petitions, as we see in the Garden of Gethsemane before his passion. In Gethsemane, at the human level, Jesus dreaded what would happen to him after his arrest but the prayer restored his peace and led him to the full acceptance of what he had to go through. At the Last Supper, as described in John's gospel, he prayed for his disciples and his future followers, a touching prayer to his Father. Something as important as disclosing the true identity of Jesus as well as his ultimate mission deserves the setting of prayer. In prayer Jesus shows who he really is to his disciples.

In the Gospel of today we hear Jesus asking his disciples about his identity and discover what people really say about him and how they identify him. The question he asked is not about who Jesus really is but about what the crowd said he is. The disciples repeated the various speculations of the crowd. They all came forth from the prophetic tradition, indicating that many believed Jesus was indeed a prophet. They spoke of Elijah, who had not tasted death and would return at the time of Messiah, Jeremiah who had hidden the Ark of the Covenant and it was time to show it; John the Baptist killed by Herod held as a prophet by the people had returned to life. The next question Jesus asked the disciples was more personal, about their understanding of him. He had been with them for more than two years and to see whether they, his close friends had really understood him. Peter, spoke on behalf of all the disciples and gave an answer which was partially correct but not complete. He said that Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen person of God." The word "Messiah" is Hebrew for the word "anointed." In Israel, kings, like priests, were anointed. The future King, who was to be the Saviour of his people and the world, came to be spoken of as "the Anointed One."

Clearly, this was the high point in the relationship of the disciples with Jesus. Unlike the crowds the disciples had come to a realization regarding the identity of Jesus as to who he really is. The

disciples of Jesus were now commissioned by him to preach and were given full authority to release people from the clutches of demons and to heal all kinds of sicknesses, while recognizing in their Master the long-awaited Messiah. It must have been a self-satisfying and exciting moment for them too. They must have been bursting to tell everyone: "Our Master is the Messiah." Jesus quickly dampened their idea of Messiah and demanded from them no publicity. He told them that they were to inform no one about it. They were all aware that the ordinary people had very specific expectations of the Messiah that he was going to defeat all Israel's enemies and restore them to former glory. After Jesus had been publicly disgraced, tried and executed like a common criminal, they could really boast of their association with Jesus as Messiah. They could tell others only when they fully grasped the meaning of Messiah who would save the world through sufferings and death.

The concept of Messiah of God captures partially who Jesus is but it is incomplete because there is nothing in that title that indicates suffering and death. On the contrary, the Messiah of God signified the tradition of David to be a King and therefore of power and glory. Here Jesus sets forth a corrective by clearly setting forth what is going to happen to him: suffer greatly, be rejected by elders, Chief priests and Scribes, be killed and on the third day be raised from the dead. This was precisely the death of Jesus that gave him a totally new and unique identity as the Messiah of God. It was also the death that would primarily be the stumbling block to people believing that he was in fact the Messiah. Indeed they must have been shocked and stunned to hear that the Son of Man must suffer and die and on the third day he would rise from the dead. Such a prophecy must have been hard for the Apostles to swallow. After all, no one had come back from the dead. However, Jesus wanted from now on to learn that this is the kind of Messiah they were following. Jesus was no popular hero of the hour, no champion of the Jewish cause against foreign domination, no leader of a liberation war. On the contrary, this Messiah would be rejected by the leaders of his own people. There must have been a stunned silence after Jesus spoke until the impetuous Peter blurted out his protest. No, victory for Jesus will come through love, loyalty to truth, integrity and non-violence.

The Gospel further draws our attention to the necessity to renounce one's life and self and to follow Jesus by persevering in the trials that may cross our daily path. Those who strive for fame, wealth, pleasures, they are lost. This is because these goals oppose spiritual growth. It is better to have little and to be happy with it; being thankful to God for all that one receives. It is better to be humble, submissive to God, obedient to the Commandments, than to elevate oneself above all others. When Jesus says "Take up your cross and follow me," they are not ordinary words; it is a strict command by the Lord Jesus Himself, to follow Him. Let us ask Jesus for the grace to be obedient and be ready to listen to him. We must remember that the death of Jesus is not an isolated event that happened to him alone. Total self-giving in imitation of Jesus is now given to us as a condition for true discipleship. Those who desire to follow Jesus must daily embrace the cross in an ongoing process of transformation. The Messiahship of Jesus was not accumulating possessions, power, prestige or glory. It was about total self-giving, including death on the cross. Discipleship too is not about gaining possessions, power, prestige and glory. It is about denying these things and to experience true Christian life according to the Gospel. Jesus is the true disciple for us to imitate. In reality to deny one's self in one sense is not possible nor is it desirable. On the contrary, we are encouraged to promote our self-esteem and the full acceptance of ourselves. We have to affirm ourselves positively without destroying the other or

cause harm to others. But, in the words of Paul who had his own full share of crosses consoles us: "Everything works together for good to those who love God."

Jesus declares that self-preservation, of being saved is not the goal of the Christian life. Losing one's life for Jesus and for others is indeed the goal a Christian ought to have. Luke bases this passion presentation of Jesus on the material from Mark and presents his own explanation for the same. The point is rather to invest ourselves and our church in God's cause, to spend and be spent in becoming "followers" of the risen crucified One. Because of Jesus' resurrection we live not for ourselves but for others, and for the greater glory of God. Yet the Gospel of today challenges us to discover what Christ means to us to our lives, in our work and in our existence. Paul invites us not to be afraid of the folly of the Cross. It is the wisdom of God. Let us receive into ourselves the Eucharist, the Body of the dead and risen Christ. Let us say to him, through Mary and for her: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

The lesson intended for us in this passage of the Gospel is given by Jesus in the last few lines. A true follower of Christ if he values eternal life must be ready to carry his cross and if necessary must be ready to be nailed to it, as Christ was. We are Christians because we sincerely want to have the eternal life he came on earth to give us. He went through the excruciating death by crucifixion, the most painful and humiliating type of execution then known. He did so in order to enable us to merit heaven. He was the Son of God and was sinless and he took them on himself for our sake. Today we are called upon to imitate him and follow him carrying our daily crosses. At the same time we thank God for the gift of faith he has given us and the invitation to be with him and to love him deeply as his followers and witnesses. We need that fidelity and trust in him.

One day a young lady was driving along with her father. They came upon a storm, and the young lady asked her father, "What should I do?" He said "keep driving". Cars began to pull over to the side, the storm was getting worse. "What should I do?" The young lady asked. "Keep driving," her father replied. On up a few feet, she noticed that eighteen wheelers were also pulling over. She told her dad, "I must pull over, I can barely see ahead. It is terrible, and everyone is pulling over!" Her father told her, "Don't give up, just keep driving!" Now the storm was terrible, but she never stopped driving, and soon she could see a little more clearly. After a couple of miles she was again on dry land, and the sun came out. Her father said, "Now you can pull over and get out." She said "But why now?" He said "When you get out, look back at all the people that gave up and are still in the storm. Because you never gave up your commitment and your storm is now over."

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