

22nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A – 2020

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

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

SCRIPTURE NOTE:

First Reading (Jer 20:7-9). Jeremiah feels overwhelmed by the demands of a task that has brought him nothing but insult and derision. He has come to his wits end. He wants to pack it all in. He feels that God has tricked him into accepting it. Yet, for all that, he cannot quit because he feels a fire burning inside him. Faithfulness in spite of the cross is the link with the Gospel.

Gospel (Mt 16:21-27). The Gospel this weekend contains the first of three predictions of the passion that we find in Matthew's Gospel. Peter gladly received the revelation of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. But he rejected out of hand the apparently contradictory of a suffering Messiah. He obviously had brought into the idea of a political Messiah. Here Matthew is concerned with discipleship. The 'cross' symbolises the sufferings, persecutions and struggles that every follower of Christ is bound to encounter. Peter represents the typical Christian, for whom the cross is a stumbling block. In the passage we see the faithfulness of Jesus, and the kind of faithfulness that is demanded of those who would follow him. From this point on, Jesus' disciples must decide if they can follow a Messiah who calls them to suffering and even death. Nevertheless, the disciples do not abandon him.

Second Reading (Rom 12:1-2). St. Paul urges the Romans not to model themselves on the people around them, but to live a life in keeping with their redeemed status. If they do this then their whole lives will become a living sacrifice pleasing to God.

REFLECTION:

The Gospel reading this weekend follows the one read last Sunday which recounted the great moment when Peter affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, "the Son of the living God." Jesus turned to Peter and declared him to be the rock and promised him the keys to the kingdom. It is a moment that is truly historic in its implications. This weekend's Gospel reading is something else. In terms of space and time, the Gospel reading from last week and this weekend lie side by side. But in mood and spirit, they are worlds apart.

Last weekend, Peter confessed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Peter's profession of faith signals a change in the Gospel of Matthew, as it does in the other synoptic gospels. Up to this point, the core of Jesus' message was the coming of the kingdom. Jesus now begins to speak more often of his passion, death, and resurrection. In the first of three predictions, he tells how he must go to Jerusalem, where he will suffer at the hands of religious leaders, dies, and be raised on the third day. Matthew shows that Jesus is following a certain destiny when he states that he "must go to Jerusalem." Peter rejects Jesus' words and now becomes the tempter. Jesus responds harshly to Peter, rebuking him in the same way he rebuked Satan during the temptations in the desert, ordering Peter to get behind him, out of his sight. (See 4:10.) This is as harsh as a slap to Peter's face. In the temptations in the desert, Satan tries to lure Jesus into a life of luxury and painlessness, which Satan realizes is contrary to Jesus' mission. Peter is speaking like Satan, seeking a comfortable life for Jesus. Jesus accuses Peter of not thinking as God thinks, but as human beings think. Jesus has an eternal view of his life. It is not a life lived for himself and his own glory, but a life lived to bring salvation to the world.

Last weekend, Jesus called Peter the "rock." This weekend, Jesus calls him a tempter and tells him to leave. The Gospel this weekend tells us about the relationship of Jesus with His followers. Peter does not want Jesus to suffer. Peter had this faulty notion in mind of a coming conquering king instead of a suffering servant. From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.' After he rebuked Jesus, Peter is in turn rebuked by Jesus. Peter must learn that the way of suffering, the way of the cross, is the way to victory. The cross must precede the crown. For Jesus suffering was the essence of Messiahship. As Satan offered Jesus kingship without suffering (4:8-9), so Peter does the same, adopting current expectations of victorious messianic conquest. Jesus recognizes the same diabolical source behind the same temptation.

None of us wants others to suffer, for the most part. Yet a human life lived in a way only to avoid suffering is a wasted life. Instead, Jesus invites us to follow Him and to accept the suffering that come with that following.

Jesus said to his disciples and tells us in strong words: *'Unless you take up your cross and follow me you cannot be my disciple.'* Clearly it is not natural for us to want the cross or to follow someone who will lead us into suffering. Nevertheless, Jesus invites us to know what life really is by following Him. If we follow the Lord, we

will suffer. We will become like the Prophet Jeremiah and complain that following God makes us suffer. We will be like Saint Paul in recognizing that we must be transformed by the renewal of our minds. In the midst of all of this, the name of God can become like fire burning in our hearts and allowing us to rejoice in this life, even in the sufferings, because we are loved by God and know that in following Him, we are returning His love.

The cross doesn't mean our arthritis, or our indigestion, or a difficult relationship, at least not in the first place. These are things that come to us in spite of ourselves. The 'cross' in the New Testament means that suffering which comes into our lives because of the choices we have made for the Gospel. In that sense it is always something we choose.

In the Gospel Jesus asks for commitment from his followers: *'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, he must renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. ... anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.'* For the committed Christian, suffering is not likelihood: it is a certainty. Being a disciple is a serious business. Yet this doesn't mean that suffering is something a Christian should seek. Jesus did not seek suffering: Gethsemane makes that clear. But suffering will inevitably be part of Christian life as it was part of Jesus' life. There are two extremes that a Christian must avoid. One extreme speaks only of personal self-fulfilment, and denies the demand of Jesus about taking up the cross. The other extreme speaks only negative language of denial and renunciation, and does not allow for the proper self-love without which true growth is not possible.

The 'cross' is a metaphor for sacrifice. Sacrifice has a harsh ring to it. It suggests hardship, discipline, renunciation, and pain. Yet there is no achievement without sacrifice. Besides, sacrifice can bring out the best in people. The person who selfishly grasps at personal fulfilment will only see it slip through his fingers, while the one who sacrifices himself for Jesus (and others) will find true fulfilment. Jesus himself has given us the example. He chose the way of self-sacrifice and suffering. It wasn't that he was in love with suffering. No. It was because he chose the way of love, and love inevitably results in suffering. But it was through his suffering that he attained to glory. He promises that those who follow him faithfully here will share his glory in the hereafter.

Dear sisters and brothers, Jesus never mentions his passion and death without also speaking of his resurrection. Peter hears only his words about Jesus' passion and death, and he cannot accept such a horrible thought. Peter has received his

proclamation of faith through the inspiration of God, but he must now understand what it means. Although we live thousands of years after the resurrection of Christ and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, we must still struggle to understand the depth of this mystery. We are continually learning.

Once Jesus establishes that he must undergo his passion, death, and resurrection, his followers must be prepared to do the same. To deny oneself in this life for the sake of the kingdom leads to eternal life, while the desire to preserve oneself in this life will lead to a loss of eternal life. We gain nothing if we gain the whole world and lose eternal life in the process. One of the temptations Jesus faced when Satan visited him in the desert was to preserve his life. If Jesus would pay homage to Satan, then Satan would give him all the kingdom of the world.

Jesus speaks of the “Son of Man” who will come in glory, accompanied by his angels. This apocalyptic image of the Son of Man reflects the belief of the early Church, which looked expectantly to the imminent Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment. Because the people of Matthew’s day believed that Second Coming would happen soon, they expected some would still be alive when it did happen.

Jesus tells us we must ready to pick up our cross and follow him. The cross is not always painful, but it can often demand a difficult manner of life. It means remaining faithful to our commitments, commitments that can become challenging in time. Paul the Apostle says it well when he writes, “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord.” (Romans 14:7-8).

In our life, everyone wants glory, but few want suffering. But the two are bound together: Even non-Christians understand this. “*No guts, no glory*” is how some folks would put it. Or again, “*No pain, no gain.*” But as the Christian, we would say, “*No cross, no crown*”. The Bible makes it clear that if we are to enjoy the glory of God, we must embrace suffering as well. We cannot have one without the other.

Everybody in the world has a cross. The issue is what we do with that cross. Do we deny it, rebel against it, kick it, curse it, numb ourselves with addictive substances to make us forget it? Or do we take it up and follow the Lord with it, and in doing so come to profound spiritual maturity? The Lord teaches us the great truth of the Christian faith that the cross is our way to life, and honest life, real life, eternal life. It is a school for every person. It teaches us the truth that sin damages everything it touches. It teaches us that true love is sacrificial. It teaches us the truth about

discipleship, that to follow Christ is to follow Him not in spite of the cross we have but through it.

Dear sisters and brothers, Jeremiah's life of struggle and fidelity is a source of courage and inspiration to us. Indeed, his faithfulness prefigures the faithfulness of Jesus. With his example to inspire us, and God's grace to strengthen us, we too can be faithful to our vocation as Jesus' disciples. Jesus says that anyone who wishes to be his disciple must take up his cross and follow him. It is not the cross for the sake of the cross. It is the cross because of fidelity, because of service, and because of love. Let's try to listen to Jesus' words carefully and put his teachings into our daily practice. Amen.

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