

Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023 Year A

Christ tells us in today's Gospel that we must renounce ourselves. What does that mean?

How do we go about renouncing ourselves? How do we give up and abandon who we are, ourselves, our personal identity, our unique individuality, the most precious thing that God has given us. As the psalms says, 'In the womb before the day break I begot you, I knew you, and knitted you together in your mother's womb.'

Put like that in the negative sense, 'renounce yourselves', it can seem a bit puzzling. But expressed in a more positive way, it means, 'discover your true selves, put aside what is false'.

If you look at it that way, then it begins to make some sense, for if Christianity is about anything at all, it is about liberation, to free man from his sinful condition and restore him to his full relationship with God. It is saying to us be who you are, but always be the best of who you are.

If you think about it, far too many of us, for most of our lives, are quite content to live with the image of ourselves that we are most comfortable with. We think that we have a fair idea at this stage of our lives of how we look and how we sound, what we like, what we believe in, what we are capable of doing and what is beyond our capabilities. All in all, we have formed and shaped an image of what our real self is like. And perhaps Christ is saying to us, be careful, you who were made in the image and likeness of God. You have been, through weak and sinful human nature, distorted that image to one of your own choosing. If you follow me, you must be prepared to let it go. To renounce all that is false in your image of yourself you must be prepared to let it fade away and die. You must lay down your old way of life, comfortable and reassuring though it is, if that self you have manufactured does not reflect the image and likeness of God.

And that is asking an awful lot of us, because at the superficial level that we are content to live our lives in, we have become comfortable and secure; we are not doing any harm to anyone. But in God's terms, we are only half alive.

As St Irenaeus said, 'the glory of God is man fully alive', and Christ is saying my 'followers don't lead superficial lives, they will have the courage to grasp the personal cross that may be involved in going deeper to the truth centre of

themselves, to discover, perhaps for the very first time, the experience of the fullness of who they really are, not what they have comfortably settled to be.

We have to be prepared to give up and renounce that self that we have grown comfortable with, and begin a new journey deeper inwards to discover at the centre of ourselves who we really are in the image and likeness of God.

Now you might quickly assess all the risks and pains and uncomfortable discoveries that may be implied in that journey for you, and all the changes that might have to be painfully made, and say 'I would rather not. just let me be as I am, as I have settled to be. I am a bit too long in the tooth for those sort of things now'.

Sorry, but that cannot be done. Christianity is not a life of half measures. It is a journey to nothing less than perfection, and we have to actively cooperate with Christ in restoring our true selves into the image and likeness of God to which we were made.

Well, it is one thing to say it, but how do you go about it? To answer that in detail would require several sermons, but obviously it means that, at the very least, having the proportionate habit of some silence and solitude within our lives just to create the conditions for the beginning of such a journey. Prayer, the Sacraments, and spiritual Reading are good for that journey.

The Kingdom of God is within you. We must journey inwards to that Kingdom, and take possession of it. We are a pilgrim people always on the move, but we are all too often prepared to move in any direction at all than inwards to the true centre of ourselves.

But it is a journey that at some stage of our existence we have to make, because when we stand before the judgement seat of Almighty God, it has to be nothing less than our true selves that we present to Him. And to present our true selves, we have to possess our true selves. If all we can present is that poor false self that we settle for, God looking for the reflection of His own image and likeness, could well say, 'I do not know you'.

In the words of the Gospel, if you are prepared to take the risk of laying down your comfortable self-image, you will find your true self. If you cling to your false self, you will lose it. If you are prepared to let go of it for Christ's sake, you will find it. What does it profit you if you gain the whole world, but never really gain your true self.

The story is told of a young boy who watched a sculptor with great interest as he began to chip steadily away at a huge block of granite. He came back some days later

and stood there in absolute awe as a sculpture of a roaring lion. 'You must be very clever', he said to the sculptor, 'how did you know that lion was in there waiting to be let out?'

Think about it, we might be absolutely astonished at the creature of splendour and beauty that patiently waits to be released from the comfortable blocks of granite that we choose to remain.