

Fr James' homily for the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-9
Second Reading: Romans 12:1-2
Gospel: Matthew 16:21-27



I'd like to highlight two contrasts in the scriptures today, from which we can learn.

First is to contrast the picture of St Peter today being rebuked by Jesus with the scene we saw last Sunday, the verses immediately before today's Gospel, when Peter is praised for his confession of faith in Jesus, his cooperation with the grace of God to declare himself for Jesus, for which he is named the "Rock", the very foundation of the Church. Has it really gone wrong so instantly? No, it is just that in his frailty - the frailty in which we all share - Peter acts on instinct and goes back to relying on himself. From that perspective, what Jesus says about his death and resurrection makes no sense and must be avoided.

"You are not thinking in God's way, but man's" is the rebuke that comes to him. Well meaning, Peter comes to a wrong and destructive conclusion when he relies solely on his own resources and his own judgement. So it is with us all! The wonder is, though, that on knowing and living with this frailty is the key to the Kingdom of God.

The second contrast is between the references to our "behaviour" in the Gospel and in St Paul's continuing advice to the Christians in Rome. In the Gospel we hear Jesus say that "the Son of Man will reward each one according to his or her behaviour." Reflect on that. I think that inevitably all of us hear those words the wrong way, the way that St Peter hears Jesus talk about his coming suffering. We hear it as merit to be given, congratulations to us for OUR virtue and efforts and ability - the things we have done by ourselves without God.

St Paul, however, describes the true life of a disciple of Jesus, a life of true health and virtue and meaning. That life is one where our efforts and abilities are surrendered to the painful job of discovering the will of God, of what is right in God's eyes rather than what seems right to our limited apprehension. About "behaviour" Paul says "let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind." This is a perfect description of the life we call the life of conversion - which is the whole meaning of the Gospel. This challenging way of being - Paul describes it as sacrificial - is the way to be truly alive and fully human as we are made to be. Remember, the first and root of sin was to give in to the impulse only to see life from our own individual and limited perspective.

By the time Paul writes these wise and holy words, both he and Peter had learned their meaning with great sacrifice, and still had more to learn.

Each Sunday, each day of our life, we are presented with a choice and a challenge - to accept God's way and model our mind, our freedom, our individuality, our very soul to God's way and so live to the full, and indeed eternally. That is the behaviour that Jesus says is to be rewarded: Losing, as it were, the illusion of freedom, to gain the freedom of the friendship of God.

I can't finish without mentioning the incredibly beautiful words of the prophet Jeremiah. "You have seduced me, Lord, and I have let myself be seduced..." These gentle but painful words describe exactly the same process of surrender to God I have been talking about. Jeremiah knows that there is no alternative to doing what God asks of him, even though all it brings him is the anger and aggression of the people of Israel to whom he must prophecy. We, the Church, have to do the same to our world and society. But we have to start with ourselves, for we cannot offer life to others without knowing it ourselves. "Think of God's mercy" says St Paul..."and worship him." That's the best advice, and it is where we start each Sunday, and each day.

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.