

22nd Sunday (A)

3rd September 2017

‘Embrace the Cross, do not flee it’

Jer 20: *The word of the Lord has meant insult for me*

Ps 62: *for you my soul is thirsting ...*

Rom 12: *do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you.*

Mt 16:21–27: *the way you think is not God’s way, but man’s.*

What are we to make of Our Lord’s outburst to St Peter in the middle of this Gospel account — “Get behind Me, Satan!”? It’s an extraordinarily stinging put-down, isn’t it? Our Lord in the previous verses (last Sunday’s Gospel) has commended Peter for his insight in realising that Jesus is “the Christ, the son of the living God.” And then, just a few moments later he is rebuking him in the strongest possible terms. Peter was, no doubt, reacting as well we might: for him, to consider Our Lord betrayed by his own people, and subjected to the most horrific tortures and crucifixion, was more than he could contemplate. No wonder, then, that he expresses his intention to dissuade Our Lord from embarking on this path to Jerusalem, the path to suffering.

And yet, this earns him no sympathy from Jesus. Such thinking, He says, is not from God, but from the evil one. “Get behind Me,” says Jesus: i.e. ‘get in line,’ ‘fall in

behind Me,’ ‘follow, like a disciple should.’ Peter has just stated the greatest truth on earth, that Jesus is the Son of God, but he still has much to learn about what that entails. And the thing that it does *not* entail is some sort of a free ride, or immunity from suffering. Instead, says Jesus, it means ‘taking up your cross every day and following Me.’ Every disciple of Jesus, who is truly a disciple, has to be ready to carry the Cross behind Jesus.

The Cross, as we Christians know, is not principally for us an instrument of torture, but it is for Jesus the sign of His love: it is the instrument He used to demonstrate His unconditional love for sinful humanity. It was not something that He could avoid or pass by. If we try to imagine Our Lord’s life without that Passion and Cross, it is suddenly emptied of its infinite meaning and salvation for us. Our Lord presses this point home to Peter: the way you think — the way of avoidance of the Cross — is not God’s way, but man’s. We’re not here on earth to feather our nest, or make for ourselves the most comfortable possible living. That is not the Way of the Cross, and it is not the way of

Christ or of His disciple. True faith in Jesus demands that we do not spend our life simply avoiding the Cross, but accepting it, even embracing it, as Jesus did. Jesus proved that true love, and the Cross, go together. There is much to put up with in life; and the only way not to get despondent about life is to see the challenges and frustrations, even the tragedies, in terms of lessons in love. If life sets us back, or we face a human sorrow, we are not to ask, “how can I flee this sorrow, this Cross ...” but we should be asking, “how can I love even more perfectly in the face of this?” How can my life change so that I embrace the Cross, out of love for Jesus, and learn how to love better and more unconditionally, as He did? This is the antidote to suffering; it is not an anaesthetic simply to dull the pain, (think how Jesus even refused the gall on the Cross which was offered Him as an analgesic). We need to invite Our Lord into the pain, for He is the only One who can lead us in and through that pain to a greater life of love.

The further words of Jesus in that Gospel passage are also very clear: “Anyone who wants to save his life will lose

it ... What will a man gain if he wins the whole world but ruins his life?” Let’s not ignore these clear teachings of Jesus. Let’s not say, ‘Oh, that’s for Peter and the others, those strong men of apostolic age.’ No, these words are for every disciple, every person who would call himself/herself a follower of Jesus: ‘renounce yourself and take up your cross and follow Me.’ We need to examine our lives and see, are we accepting the challenges of life to love ever more perfectly, ever more radically, ever more like Jesus loves? There is no point in life in amassing just comforts and pleasures, or in making life as trouble-free as possible — this is an anodyne life, and ultimately empty. Life is about embracing the Cross, and knowing that Jesus has already carried a far greater Cross, and so can help bear ours if only we will attend His school of love and learn from Him. “Shoulder My yoke and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,” He says. Let’s lean on Jesus. What is your Cross at this particular time? ... Name it ... *Jesus, help me carry my Cross and learn from You how this Cross leads me to love better and better those around me.*