

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 20:7-9
<i>Response</i>	My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 12:1-2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our hearts, that we may know what is the hope that belongs to our call.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 16:21-27

The 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the middle of Matthew's Gospel and moves us into a theme that's very prominent in the teaching of Jesus, but also very difficult, and that's a relationship between discipleship, following Jesus, and the mystery of suffering, the mystery of the cross. So in this instance we are going to be looking at the story of how Jesus begins to talk about the cross to the disciples and how they react against it — especially Peter — and then how that provides a springboard for him to open up the mystery of the cross in the life of all of his disciples, and the relation between suffering and following him. So the Gospel for this week is from Matthew 16:21-27:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? For the Son of man is to come with

his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done.¹

So what do we make of this mysterious text, this mysterious passage in Matthew's Gospel? Let's try putting it in its context. First, notice the setting. When it says that “from that time Jesus began to show his disciples he must suffer,” it's talking about after Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi. So this happens immediately after Jesus asked his disciples who he is, and then Peter responds by saying you're the son of God, and then Jesus has just renamed Simon as Peter, the rock upon which he will build his Church. Now no sooner does that happen, then Jesus begins to basically open up the mystery of the cross to them. And as usual, Peter, good ole impetuous Peter, jumps the gun and takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Now think about that for just a second. Think about the audacity of Peter, one of the students, one of the disciples, taking the master aside and saying “look, let me tell you how it's going to be.” That's what “rebuke him” means. He is rebuking Jesus' declaration of the passion, and so something amazing happens here. When Peter says “this is never going to happen to you,” Jesus turns around and says “get behind me Satan.” In a sense, what's going on in that verse — most people are familiar with it, but think about it for a second — in context, what is Jesus doing? He's giving Peter another name. He's just renamed Simon as Peter, the foundation of the Church; now he turns around and called him Satan, who is the adversary of God's people.

Now why would he do something so harsh? Well notice what Jesus says there. He doesn't just rename Peter as Satan, he says “get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me.” The Greek word here for hindrance is *skandalon*. We get the English word scandal from that, so he is saying you are a scandal to me. Now what is interesting about that is that in the original Greek, the word *skandalon* literally means “a stumbling stone.” A *skandalon* would be a stone in the path that you trip over when you are walking. So what Jesus is doing here, in a sense, is punning off of the name he just gave Peter. So when Peter was confessing faith in Jesus' divine sonship he was the rock, he was the *Petra*; but now that he is opposed

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

to the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus, he's become a *skandalon*, a stumbling stone. So he is still a rock, but he's taken on a different form here. So this is very powerful. Why would Jesus speak so harshly to Peter? Why is he saying these things about him? Well, because the way Jesus, as divine son of God, has come in to the world to save the world is precisely through suffering, it's through the redemptive suffering of his cross. And to the extent that Peter opposes the idea of Jesus' suffering and dying, he opposes the salvation of the world, he opposes the way that God has chosen to redeem the world, to set it free from sin and death, and of course then, in a sense, he is also opposing the resurrection, because that is going to be the ultimate consequence of Jesus's passion and his death. So this conflict between him and Peter, in a sense, opens up for Jesus the opportunity to talk about true discipleship.

Most of us, when we think about the story of Peter and Jesus, we end with “get behind me Satan.” We say “look at Jesus, he kind of rebuked Peter because Peter doesn't understand the cross.” That is not where the story stops in Matthew's Gospel, because in Matthew's Gospel Jesus — once again — uses Peter's mistake as an opportunity to open up a deeper mystery, to teach them something further. And in this case, it is about the mystery of suffering and discipleship. So what does Jesus say? Well he makes a few points. First, he lays out the conditions for being a disciple. He says “if any man would come after me,” let them do two things. He has “to deny himself” and he has to “take up his cross and follow me.” What does that mean? Well, when Jesus says “if anyone will come after me,” he's using a very concrete metaphor for following him as a disciple. Now today when we talk about being believers in Jesus, we put all the emphasis — or most of the emphasis — on accepting certain doctrines of Jesus, like I believe he is divine, I believe he is the Son of God, so I'm a believer. But in the Gospels, you will notice that the disciples aren't called believers — although they do believe — they are called disciples, and the Greek word disciple literally means “a student,” *mathitís* is the word. So if you're a student, you follow the master. You don't just believe what the master says, you imitate him, you live like him, you walk with him, you act like him. So Jesus saying if you want to be my disciple, you have to do two things, you have to accept suffering and you have to imitate me.

What's the image he uses for that? A very striking one. He says “you have to deny yourself and take up your cross.” Now again, in contemporary Christianity, we

will use the metaphor of taking up your cross as an example for accepting the sufferings of our daily life, and that's a good application of the image. But in a first century Jewish setting that metaphorical meaning hadn't happened yet. If you told someone you have to take up your cross, the cross was a form of execution and nothing more. It was simply the most brutal, the most heinous, the most shameful way to die at the hands of the Roman Empire in the first century A.D. So when Jesus says to Peter and the disciples "if you want to follow me, you have to take up your cross," he's calling them to nothing less than suffering and death. It would be like today to take some other method of execution and say "you have to take up your electric chair and follow me." That would be a shocking and grizzly image for being my student, being my follower, and yet that's how Jesus described discipleship. He is pulling no punches here about what's involved in being a follower. You have to accept suffering. And notice that, it's not just that you suffer, but he says "take up the cross." In other words, pick it up, carry it and walk behind me, imitate me, follow me. Why? Well because where is Jesus going? He's going to Jerusalem to die and his disciples need to follow him. He's going to walk the way of the cross all the way to Calvary, and then through Calvary to the resurrection. So those are the conditions of discipleship, accepting suffering and imitating Christ.

The second thing Jesus gives here is the paradox of discipleship, because most of us if we encounter suffering, what do we try to do? We have a natural inclination to save our lives, to avoid suffering, to run from it, to flee from it. And what does Jesus say here? "Whoever would save his life," paradoxically ends up losing it, "but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." So notice that. What is the paradox of discipleship? It's that if we as disciples willingly suffer, even unto death, for the sake of Jesus, we actually end up saving ourselves, we end up saving our lives. We are afraid to lose life, but the reality is that Jesus is the only one who can give it. So the paradox of discipleship is the paradox of the cross. The only way to the glory of the resurrection, for Jesus himself, is through the cross of Calvary. And the same thing is going to be true for his disciples. Unfortunately it's easy for us to want the glory of the resurrection without the shame and the suffering of Good Friday, but there is no other ladder to heaven — St. Rose of Lima said — than the ladder of the cross. That is the paradox of discipleship. It's precisely through suffering that we enter into life, that we end up saving our lives.

The third thing Jesus lays out here is what I would call the cost of discipleship. His final saying there is “what does it profit someone, if he gains the whole world but he forfeits his life?” Now let me pause there for a second. The Revised Standard Version translates that as forfeits his life and other translations will do the same thing there, but the Greek word is actually *psychē*, it's the word we get psychology from, and it means, literally, “the soul.” *Psychē* in Greek can mean both soul and life, and in this case the more likely meaning in context is soul. In other words, “what does it profit a person if they gain the whole world,” in other words the whole material world, “but they lose their soul.” And you will see Jesus talk about this frequently in other cases where people give themselves over to the desire for riches and wealth and they end up losing the kingdom of God, they lose eternal life. And he says again, “what should a man get in ransom,” in return, “for his soul?” In other words, is there any money, is there any gold in the world that is precious enough to buy even a single human soul? And the answer is no. So the cost of discipleship is Jesus' final message here.

What is he saying to the disciples? If you want to be my follower, it's not going to cost you anything on one level, it is free; it's just going to cost you everything on the spiritual level. Namely, it's going to cost you your life. It is going to cost you your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength, because that's what he's calling his disciples to give to him. To love him, to love the Lord with all their heart, all their mind, all their soul and all their strength, even unto death. So what Jesus is trying to reveal here is that if people want to chase after the things of this world, if they want to gain the whole world, and even if they just want to save their own natural life, they risk losing the supernatural life of the kingdom and the eternal life of the soul. That is the mystery and the paradox of discipleship to Jesus.

And if you have any doubts about the fact that he's talking about the soul and about the resurrection and about eternal life, you can just look at that final verse of the Gospel. Because what does he fast forward to? The last judgment. “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man according to what he has done.” So the context he gives for all he is teaching is the final judgment and the resurrection of the dead. So why should I not fear suffering? Why should I accept it and try to imitate Christ? Because I have eyes fixed on the final judgment and the resurrection of the dead. Why shouldn't I try to save my life? Why should I be willing to give my life for the sake

of the Gospel instead of clinging to natural life? Because my ultimate goal is the resurrection, the final judgment when the Son of man comes to judge the living and the dead. Why is it more valuable to me to hold on to my soul rather than gain the whole world? Because if I keep my soul I can participate in the resurrection the dead and the life of the world to come, the eternal life of the kingdom. So all of this is in the context of the hope of salvation. That's what Jesus is trying to teach the disciples, and he uses Peter's gaffe here of opposing him as the opportunity to unveil this mystery.

Now with that in mind then, what does the Old Testament reading for today have to do with this? It is kind of an interesting selection here. The Church here has chosen a very famous passage from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah 20:7-9, which describes the suffering of Jeremiah. So again, the theme of suffering is ready at hand, it is at the center here. And in this context, what Jeremiah is doing is basically lamenting his vocation. So if you know anything about the book of Jeremiah, if you know anything about the prophet Jeremiah, you'll know that Jeremiah is not, shall we say, the happy prophet of the Old Testament. He is called by God at a time of great sinfulness, or great iniquity, and basically on the brink of the destruction of Jerusalem, and his job, he gets the wonderful job of having to tell the people of Jerusalem that they are wicked, sinful, and that God is going to allow Jerusalem to be destroyed and the temple is going down. And as you might imagine, the people of Jerusalem didn't exactly like that message, and so they persecuted Jeremiah, they rejected Jeremiah. Some of the leaders even tried to kill Jeremiah. They imprisoned him. And so in the midst of all that suffering that was part of his vocation as a prophet, Jeremiah makes a lament to God and this is what he says:

O LORD, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
every one mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"

For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

So what's going on there? Jeremiah is basically feeling like he's been duped by God, because he was called to be a prophet and give the word to the people and what has it won for him? Nothing except derision, mockery, persecution and suffering. In other words, Jeremiah, as a prophet, has had to take up the cross. He has had to willingly accept the suffering that comes with his prophetic vocation in order to bring the word of God to the people of Israel. And the mystery of his prophetic vocation, of that discipleship, is that although he would like to not speak the word of God, he can't help himself. He said "it is like a fire shut up in my bones, and I cannot help but speak." He cannot help but proclaim, even though all it brings him is suffering and weariness and rejection. So Jeremiah then, in that sense, is a kind of type of Christ. He points forward to Jesus himself, who is going to go to the city of Jerusalem, prophesy its destruction, and eventually meet his death at the hands of the leaders of the city who will reject him. In fact, if you remember from one of the earlier Sundays, Matthew 16, when Jesus asked Peter and the disciples "who do people say the Son of man is?" It said "some say Jeremiah," and although that's wrong, there's a partial truth there, because Jesus is like a new Jeremiah. He too has to go through the crucible of suffering in order to bring the word of God to the people of Jerusalem.

And so that is the link, that is the key for understanding the Responsorial Psalm as well, which is a song about the soul thirsting for God, longing to be united with God, longing to be with the Lord. Just like Jeremiah, in the context of his suffering, reaches out to God as his last end, and so too as Jesus is trying to teach the apostles not to give up their soul in order to try to save their life or to chase

after the things of this world, to accept through the cross, to enter the glory of the resurrection.

In closing then, I would just like to give a couple reflections from the living tradition of the Church. There are two great quotes about this passage in Matthew 16 that I have found very helpful. Because let's face it, the cross is a scandal. This is one of those aspects of Christianity that just isn't very attractive. Contrast it with the health and wealth gospel you sometimes hear evangelists on the television talk about. You know, you believe in Jesus you are going to be blessed with money and riches and health and wealth. And then you open the Gospels and what does Jesus say? You be my disciple and you are going to be blessed with the cross. Those two things are at odds with one another. So it can be hard though when you look at the Gospel and if you look at Jesus' statement here. There are so many forms of suffering. Each of us has our own crosses in our lives that often seem impossible to bear. How can Jesus ask us to accept them? What is he really calling us to as disciples? And in this, I would take wisdom from two Saints of the Church, two canonized saints. One is St. Augustine, and the other is St. Josemaria Escriva, a modern saint that lived in the 20th century. This is what they had to say about this passage in the Gospel of Matthew. In one of his sermons, St. Augustine wrote this about the cross and love, he says:

Our Lord's command seems hard and heavy, that anyone who wants to follow him must renounce himself. But no command is hard and heavy when it comes from one who helps to carry it out. That other saying of his is true: "My yoke is easy and my burden light." Whatever is hard in his commands is made easy by love.²

You hear almost a little hint in this, or a little foreshadowing, of St Thérèse of Lisieux, the little way of love. She lived the gospel in her own life by making small sacrifices with great love. That was her way of embracing the cross, to willingly choose to sacrifice little things in the daily things of life in order to acquire the habit of taking up the cross and uniting it to the love of Jesus, learning how to love through sacrifice. And what Augustine is basically saying here is that although the command seems hard, when it is animated by love it actually becomes

² Augustine, *Sermon* 96.1-4

easy, because the grace of Christ enables us to willingly choose the cross for love of God and for love of neighbor. If you think about this, even on the human level, people who are in love will do crazy things. They will go to amazing lengths in order to express their love for one another. They will suffer and they will even die in order to express their love just for another human being at the natural level. Well that is what Christ is calling us to as well as in his call to discipleship. And St. Josemaria Escriva, in one of his meditations, *The Way of the Cross*, actually pointed this out, he said that one of the keys to being a Christian disciple is not just to accept suffering or to take up the cross, but to do it willingly and to do it with joy and to do it with love. I love these lines, this is what St. Josemaria wrote:

“If anyone would follow me...” Little friend, we are sad, living the Passion of our Lord Jesus. See how lovingly he embraces the cross. Learn from him. Jesus carries the cross for you: You... carry it for Jesus. But don't drag the cross... Carry it squarely on your shoulders, because your cross, if you carry it so, will not just be any cross... It will be the holy cross. Don't carry your cross with resignation: resignation is not a generous word. Love the cross. When you really love it, your cross will be, a Cross without a cross. And surely, you will find Mary on the way, just as Jesus did.³

That is a beautiful reflection there on the way of the cross and the rosary and the mystery of carrying the cross. So what St. Josemaria Escriva is basically saying there is that the only way we can find joy in the paradox of carrying the crosses of our lives, is not to carry them with resignation — like to drag the cross — but to learn to love the cross, and through loving the cross we will transform all the sufferings of this life into love, and that will transform them into a cross without a cross.

³ J. Socias, Daily Roman Missal, p. 2427