

*24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
THE WAY OF THE CROSS – THE ONLY WAY*

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8: 34).

Life and the Cross: Life is a mixture of cheers and tears, joys and sorrows, success and failure, the pleasures of happiness and the crosses of pains. If we have a choice, we will always choose the joyful and pleasurable, the success and achievements. We seem to live our lives trying to avoid whatever is difficult and painful. No one likes the pinches and scratches of life. Therefore, the message of Jesus in the Gospel of today (Mk.8: 27-35) is rather uncomfortable and unexpected. And this is where the actual truth of the message of the Gospel lies – that it is in the uncomfortable that we find comfort. Jesus presents us with the truth as it is without painting an illusion. He calls us to Himself without offering any easy way, except the way of the Cross. The Way of the Cross is the way through the narrow gate; it is that rough and narrow road, discovered by a few, that leads to life (Matt. 7: 13-14). Let us take a deeper look at the messages the Lord has for us in the entire Readings.

Leading From the Front: The invitation to walk the way of the Cross to have eternal life was already a theme in the prophecy of Isaiah (42: 1-9; 49: 1-7; 50: 4-11; 52: 13-53: 12), spoken some 700 hundred years before Christ, as the way of the Messiah. Therefore, Jesus knew that shame and humiliation was awaiting Him; that He would be condemned by those He came to save; mocked and derided; saddled with the wood of the cross upon which he would be nailed to die like a thief. Yet, He embraced all these with love and in obedience to the Will of the Father, trusting that God would not fail to glorify Him. This is the journey that Jesus is inviting us: a journey of faith, acceptance, surrender and trust. On this walk, Jesus leads the way, and we follow, for He would not ask us to do what He has not done Himself, neither would He ask us to do what he has not provided the grace to accomplish.

The Questions, The Teaching and The Tasks: The Gospel (Mk. 8: 27-35) could be viewed from three perspectives of the questions of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus about His mission, and the tasks or the invitation to share in the same mission.

1. **The Question:** Jesus was not asking the questions because He was ignorant of the answers that would come. The questions were intended to open the minds of the disciples to a deeper understanding of His Person and His mission. The question: “Who do the people say I am?” was only leading to one more personal and querying: “You, who do you say I am?” This is the question at the heart of the Gospel. It was addressed to the disciples, who were closer to Jesus, as it is addressed to us, who have been configured to Christ in our baptism and united with Him in the other sacraments. What is our answer today? Who is Jesus to us? How do we know Him? What sort of knowledge is it? Is it mere notional

knowledge from the Bible, Literatures, or from what we hear from the preachers and teachers of faith? Do we know Him personally to confess like Peter: “You are the Christ”? Remember “No one can say Jesus is Lord except led by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12: 3). Thus, we need the grace of the Holy Spirit to direct our hearts to this truth.

2. **The Teaching:** Rightly, Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One, Son of Man. Knowing what was on their minds based on the prevalent concept of the Messiah among the Jews of His time, Jesus immediately taught His disciples the kind of Messiah He was missioned to be – a humble suffering Servant, who came to serve not to be served and to give His life as a ransom for many. One destined to suffer grievously and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. This idea of the Messiah was not germane among the Jews. For them, the Messiah was to be a king, a warrior, conqueror, a political leader, who would overthrow the ruling Roman imperialists and install the rule of the people of God, thus restoring the reign of David. This is where Peter was coming from when he could not resist the urge to remonstrate with Him. Jesus rebuked him, calling him “Satan!” Why did Jesus call him that? Jesus saw in Peter the image of the Ancient Serpent that tempted Eve and Adam and caused them to derail from the initial plans of God. By trying to dissuade Jesus, Peter made himself an adversary and a tempter. Does it surprise you that it had to be Peter? The lesson here is that most often the tempter’s voice is hidden in the coated words of those closest to us, those we trust, those we look up to. This same Peter is called “The Rock” by the same Lord. This reveals the feeble and strong natures in each of us. We may be weak, but we can also be strong; we may be wrong, but we can also be right; we may fail, but we can succeed. Never let the weak overpower the strong; never be discouraged when failure and mistakes and error raise their heads. Our Lord Himself experienced all these and has called us to walk with Him.
3. C. **The Tasks:** Notice that whereas in the first two parts of the Gospel, Jesus was addressing only his disciples; but in this last part that has to do with self-renunciation and the cross, “He called the people and His disciples.” There is something here for us: the denial of self and acceptance of the cross is not an exclusive task of the disciples, but for everyone. It is an open invitation: “Anyone who wants to be a follower ...” The cross, therefore, is a gift of the Lord given to all or to anyone, who so chooses to accept, to prove his love for Him. To accept the cross, one must renounce himself, that is, deprive himself of pleasures and comforts to take up the inconveniences that must come. Renouncing oneself, therefore, is to detach from earthly pleasures and be attached to the principles enunciated by Christ in the Gospel – to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the homeless visit the sick and the imprisoned – even at our expense. Our crosses come in different and varied dimensions – in our struggles that seem endless, in a parent dying of cancer, in an alcoholic son, in a daughter whose heart is broken by a failed love, in a broken and disgruntled

family, in natural disasters, in persecution, in wars, in a global pandemic and more. As Christians, Christ calls us to accept these with profound faith, generosity, patience, and love, trusting that God, Who did not abandon Him, will not abandon us. Saint Pope John Paul II explains: "This is the paradox of the cross: We accept suffering not because it is good and not because we like it but as part of our vocation as followers of Jesus Christ. These crosses can become opportunities for us to grow closer to Jesus and give him glory." To accept the cross is another way of living out our faith in practice as St. James exhorts in the Second Reading (James 2: 14-18). Jesus concludes His teaching with a timeless provocative paradox: "For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it." For us Christians, we gain from our losses; we become strong in weakness; we grow greater by staying smaller; we are masters when we serve; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. This can be hard for the faithless to understand, but for those who believe, God has given us the insight to know and accept this truth.

My dear friends, the Readings of today challenge us in so many ways. Like Peter, we may know Jesus as The Christ without understanding His ways. One can believe in Jesus without accepting the idea of suffering as part of the package. But no one can be a disciple of Jesus without taking up the cross on his journey. We are called to stand "behind" Jesus to learn from Him and be able to follow Him in self-denial and loving acceptance of the cross. Like Jesus, we have a reason for being in this world, but we must be watchful so that the Ancient Serpent may not dissuade us from fulfilling our purposes. Know that Satan can come under any guise, even in the form of our best friend, like Peter to Jesus. We are called here to remain focused on the Lord.