

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time A - Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

September 3, 2023

Last Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus renamed Simon as Peter, the Rock" the foundation of the Church. Yet, this Sunday, Jesus calls him "Satan" (Matthew 16:21-27). "***Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.***" What is going on? *First*, it is quite clear that Jesus' emotional state has changed. He is obviously dreading the suffering and death he will soon have to face as a human on earth. *Second*, Jesus had been gradually schooling the disciples about who he really is. Not just a great teacher, or a good friend, but the complete revelation of divine love. They had achieved their first high mark last week when Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This week Jesus shows the real meaning of Christly love: **for the good of the world he must suffer greatly and be killed, and on the third day be raised.** Do the Apostles get it? Obviously not. The Gospel reports that now Peter "rebukes" Jesus. Something like this: No, no, no, no, Lord, we will protect you—this will not happen to you. We need you to be alive. You are the Christ! We need you to use your powers! It is an impulsive response. Peter is telling Jesus to avoid pain by selfishly using his divine powers. To put it another way, Jesus would have to act according to the self-seeking part of human nature. Go for the wealth, the power and the reputation. Forget Godly love. Since he was human

Peter definitely knew that Jesus was the messiah awaited by God's people, but he did not understand that Jesus would be a suffering messiah. But it did happen to Jesus, and it happens to those who follow him: "If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self (and) take up his cross." Jeremiah in this Sunday's first reading (20:7-9) had foretold the suffering of those who work for the coming of the kingdom: **"I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me ... the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all the day."** It is not easy to follow Christ. Like Peter, often we fail to grasp the role of suffering in God's plan, thinking being in God's kingdom means success, happiness, health and wealth. But we have to accept Jesus' challenge to embrace pain and personal suffering in order to gain eternal life and everlasting values. Very often in this world we are accused of being unpatriotic if we work for peace. We stand up for the poor and are written off as a naive dreamer. If we work for nonviolent change, we might get killed like Martin Luther King or Archbishop Oscar Romero. So many of us will calmly go about our life, praying that God fill our hearts with love and increase our faith. So we don't do anything and remain passive as we carry on with our everyday life. **"Do not conform yourselves to this age,"** Paul wrote to the Romans in this Sunday's second reading (12:1-2). We pay a price for such an approach. Even many church-goers think only of themselves and reluctantly give God forty minutes on Sunday morning, yet if asked to identify themselves would profess to be Christians. But are they, truly? The Church, like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes. By the power of the risen Lord, she is given strength to overcome patiently and lovingly the afflictions and hardships which assail her from within and without, and to show forth in the world the mystery of the Lord in a faithful though shadowed way, until at the last it will be revealed in total splendour. (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, 1964:8.) Being a Christian is a demanding honour because God's way of doing things is contrary to human expectations.

Does God want us to be happy? Definitely! And yet look at Christ's line in the Gospel reading. Deny yourself, Jesus tells his faithful followers; take up your cross and follow me. Denying ourselves seems the very opposite of going for happiness, and the cross is an instrument of torture and humiliation. Why would God want these things for his people? Does God want us to be unhappy? Our earthly pilgrimage is full of trials and tribulations that it is aptly named a 'valley of tears'. We all have our share of hardship. A man divorcing his middle-aged, dowdy wife to marry a much younger, more beautiful and successful woman explained his decision to his devastated wife that "God wants me to be happy and I can't be happy with you. I will be happy with her." It seems never to have crossed the mind of this husband that God might have any care for his wife's happiness. This little story, common in its selfishness, shows the sickness of the post-fall human condition, so apt to privilege its own power or pleasure over any greater good. When things go wrong, we protest in bitter rebellion. But running away from pain and making short term exchanges can never bring joy, for to hide from it is to pretend that it does not exist. We can't be truly happy when we are glad to crush others to get what we want. What will make us

happy? What will save us from this evil? This is where Christ's line comes in. The route to the happiness God wants for us has to go through the cross of Christ. Christ is *The Way* for us, and the cross is where we meet him, for the road to our true happiness is love and holiness in him.

This Sunday's second reading is from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (12:1-2). After having presented a deep look at the mysteries of the gospel, Paul begins the teaching on the way the Christian should live with these two verses: **"I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."** The Gospel demands that we give ourselves up to God as a living sacrifice. We are to follow Christ who gave Himself up as a living sacrifice to the Father. There are people who do just that. Their lives revolve around caring for others in their families, at their workplaces, in their neighbourhoods. All of this takes sacrifice. St. Paul warns us not to conform to this world but be transformed by the renewal of our mind so we might discern what the will of God is, what is good, pleasing and perfect. It is easy to conform to the world. It is easy to just go along with what everyone is doing without even considering how our actions are devastating our spiritual life. Our spiritual radar should go up when we hear someone say, "It's a new world now. Things have changed. Everyone is doing this or that." We need to ask ourselves, "Am I willing to sacrifice my spiritual life to join what people say everyone is doing?" Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's (the late Pope Benedict XVI) homily during the *Mass for electing a Roman Pontiff*¹ on April 18, 2005, called attention to the problem of a "dictatorship of relativism" which centred on the "ego" and its "desires." He mentioned the danger for most people nowadays is to be carried about by "ideological currents" and "fashionable opinions." - just following the trend, the thinkings of the time, accepting what society is asking us to accept without thinking if it is right or wrong. That is what sin is, isn't it? Sin is pushing God aside for the sake of conforming to the world. In Jesus' prayer to His Father in John 17:16 he prays for us and says, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." When we conform to that which is not the Christian way of life, we are going against our very being, our spiritual essence. Sin leaves us disjointed and steals our identity. In Jeremiah 2 the prophet warns the people, and us that when we seek that which is worthless, we become worthless. It is so right when we say, "I cannot do that. I am so much better than that."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to make many decisions everyday, and it can be hard. But it is easy and simple if we make them by listening to God. As Proverbs 2 says: **"if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, ...you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom... He holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path."** When we're making a decision and choosing what's going to be our ultimate authority in life, it boils down to this: God's Word or the world? If we base our life on popular opinion, we're always going to be out of date because popular opinion changes every day. What was "in" yesterday is "out" today, and what's "in" today will be "out" tomorrow. If we do that, we will struggle because we're building on a shifting foundation! On the other hand, if we base our life on God's Word, the truth never changes and God is the Truth! So if God says something was wrong 10,000 years ago, it was also wrong 500 years ago, it's wrong today, and it will be wrong 1,000 years from now. And if God says it's right, it will always be right. That is a solid foundation! God has set up the universe with certain laws—physical, moral, and spiritual. God built the universe around these laws because they're all for our benefit. When we cooperate with the principles in this universe, we're more likely to succeed. Yes, that's the opposite of our culture. Our society teaches us to think only of ourselves. But God wants us to think about others, not just ourselves. In fact, the Bible says that one day we're going to be judged by God on how our decisions affected other people. If we reject, disobey, ignore, and rebel against God's principles, we will surely get hurt. **Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.** God bless you all.