

## Twenty-Second Sunday In Ordinary Time – September 9/3/17

My dear people of God. I wish to start our reflection for today by quoting the words of St Paul from the second reading: "*offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.*"

Saint Paul lived in the first century AD, when the dominant religions were all pagan. Pagan religions were based on a belief in the power of external rituals. These rituals sometimes consisted of sacrifices in which animals were slaughtered, grain was burned, or wine was poured out. They also sometimes consisted of ritual dances, prayers, songs, or similar actions.

In every case, however, the power of the worship (its supposed ability to convince the false god to send blessings on the worshipper), depended on the *exact performance of the ritual.*

It was like a gymnastics routine in the Olympics: if the ritual wasn't performed with perfect precision, the worshipper would get a bad score, and the gods would either ignore the prayer or get angry. This pagan focus on external rituals had also seeped into Jewish practices at the time.

Throughout his writings, therefore, St Paul constantly reminded the early Christians against *falling into ritualism*. He taught the early Church to have a close personal relationship with God, *not a cold, distant relationship clogged with empty formalities.*

People of God, our relationship with God must not be reduced to a few rituals and prayers: everything we do is meant to become a **worship**. Saint Paul insisted on this new concept of religion - a religion built on a personal friendship with the one true God who became man in Jesus Christ. Our relationship with God is not based on external rituals; it is based on an internal identity.

We need to realize that such a personal relationship with God requires, as St Paul wrote, that Christians "*be transformed by the renewal of their mind.*"

Every aspect of our lives, everything we do, can glorify God and help build up His Kingdom.

Allow me to speak in the first person singular: my actions, my words, my decisions, they way I live my daily life - all these things are ways for me to show that I love Christ and that I want to follow Him. I must remind myself that Christianity is such a dynamic religion - it isn't limited to the sacristy and the altar; it should overflow into everything I do and it should fill me with the desire to do more and more, that my relationship with God is not based on external rituals; it's based on an internal identity.

Allow me to go to the first reading. We heard from the Prophet Jeremiah that he was experiencing that inner battle between the spiritual and the worldly ways. Choosing what was convenient and easy, going with the flow or embracing the worldly way rather than the will of God, would have made Jeremiah's life comfortable. People mocked him for being God's spokesperson. Jeremiah wanted to give up, but he could not. He said, *"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak anymore of his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."*

*But God does not deceive—and Jeremiah knows this.*

1. *God tests the just* (Jeremiah 20:11–12),
2. *and disciplines His children through their sufferings and trials* (Hebrews 12:5–7).

Jeremiah's mission transformed him. He knew that his identity consisted in being personally attached/connected to Yahweh and that he could not be any other person but Yahweh's prophet. Was it easy? NO ! But it was doable.

Brothers and sisters: The Lord wants us to realize that standing to what is godly is never easy. But we are capable because God will supply His grace.

Now, let us take a look at the gospel. We meet deep human concerns and feelings in the gospel today. Peter is shocked to the core that Jesus would die; so shocked that he even forgot that Jesus promised that He would rise *on the third day*. Jesus talks very seriously about the cost of following Him, like the cost of following any commitment in life.

Jesus said to his apostles in today's Gospel, chapter 16, verse 24: "*Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.*"

Prior to that statement of Jesus, we heard from Matthew in verses 21 to 23 the historical background. Let us take verses 21 to 23 as part of a narrative which we can situate historically. Then, we will take verses 24 to 27 as part of the *teachings of Jesus* arising from the narrative.

Verses 21 to 23 would allow us to capture the power of the passage, situating it historically, and remembering that the incident it relates came at a very significant moment in the life of Jesus. It is one all human beings pass through – *a moment of truth*.

Up till then Jesus had been ministering in Galilee in the North of Palestine, far from Jerusalem in the South. He had met with great success at first:

- (1) “*he went round the whole of Galilee. . .“his fame spread throughout Syria”* (Matthew 4:23-25)
- (2) “*and spread the news about Jesus all over that part of the country*(Matthew 9:26; Matthew 9:31)

We can go on enumerating the success stories of Jesus.

But soon, opposition to Him had grown, however, mainly from scribes (e.g. Matthew 9:11) and Pharisees (e.g. Matthew 12:1-2; Matthew 1:24). At this point in His life then, Jesus decided that the time had come for Him to confront these opposing forces at the seat of their power, Jerusalem, home of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 15:1). It was a decision which would have tragic consequences, but the passage shows that He accepted them fully, basing Himself on His understanding of every person's life journey.

Verses 21 to 23 invite us to celebrate similar “*moments of truth*” we have lived through, when we chose a course of action which we knew would cause hurt to people we loved and admired, and would bring us rejection and pain, taking a decision to be more radical in our following of Jesus.

We begin to recognize the different characters in the narrative. Who are “the elders, chief priests and scribes” – the “experts” we must confront? Who is the “Peter” – a dear respected friend, and yet we must find the courage to say to him, “Get behind me”?

Through meditation on verses 21-23, the sayings in verses 24 to 27 will no longer be abstract theories, but lessons about life which we have experienced concretely. We will be aware of the things we would have "lost" if we had tried to "save" them, of wonderful things we "found" because we took the risk of losing them. We will feel convinced that there is nothing we would "exchange" for the blessings which came to us as a result of our choices.

We will naturally pray for those who are facing moments of truth at present, with compassion since we know the pain involved, and also with confidence, since we are aware that Jesus is living His story in them.

Jesus invites us to live at the deepest level of ourselves. In the area of life where we live and love, laugh and cry, worry and enjoy, hurt and forgive. In all these very personal sides of life, Jesus dwells, since He says that He makes His home in us.

We can call it a sort of "*third day*" hope. Nothing except love, which is eternal, was final for Jesus. For all the worst things of life there was a third day. The day on which ***hope would be fuller than any despair***, and when life would be more lasting than death.

My dear people of God: **We are "third day" people**, knowing that the love and life of God, promised at our baptism, will always be in the air around us, filling us with the breath of God, and breathing fragrance all around us.

Jesus says to us now: "Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me." But Jesus doesn't promise that following Him will lead to a problem-free life. Our crosses too, then, become part of the "living sacrifice" and "spiritual worship" that please God, which Saint Paul told us in the second reading.

Jesus has redeemed the world, even turning our sorrows into paths of salvation, just as in a few minutes he will turn our offerings of bread and wine into his own grace-filled body and blood. May we nourished by His gift of His very SELF.

May God bless us all always.