

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus turned to Peter and said: “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God’s way”...Then Jesus said to his disciples: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.”



Matthew 16, 21-27

What exactly comes into your mind when you hear Jesus in today’s gospel saying: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”? I suspect that many Christians interpret Jesus as saying that suffering is an integral part of being one of his disciples - “Come and join me, and prepare yourself for a good dose of pain and suffering!”

Nobody in his or her right mind goes around recommending suffering as good medicine for anything. So what Jesus was merely saying is that there is a cost to all the goals in life that are worth striving for. If you want to be selected in the Australian swimming team for the London Olympics, then you’ll have to refrain from fast food, chocolate and lashings of ice-cream and follow a very strict diet, get up early and swim miles every day. If you want to get a Master’s degree in Education, you will have to attend lectures at night and on weekends and complete all the required written assignments. There are no short-cuts and no saloon passages. There is no growth, no success without discipline and effort. Crosses are part and parcel of life.

In his book, *Lessons of Scripture*, William Bausch tells the story of an elderly Religious sister who told her spiritual director about the disappointment she felt when a promising young sister left the community and returned home. The elderly sister spoke glowingly of the enthusiasm, hope and energy which the younger woman had brought to everything she did. She also spoke of how she began to pray for the young sister when it became obvious that she was struggling with whether she would stay or go. At no stage did the elderly sister affirm the young woman, encourage her, offer advice or tell her how much she was appreciated. She prayed earnestly that God would help her, but did nothing to help bring about what she was asking God to do. It turned out that other members of the community took the same approach. They prayed for the young sister and were all upset when she left their community. They prayed, but made no other effort to bring to reality what they were asking God to do. We have all prayed for friends and relatives who have found themselves in difficult circumstances, who have been incapacitated by illness and injury, who have been afflicted with depression but if we have done nothing to ease their distress, have failed to visit them or reach out with

words of comfort and encouragement, how have our prayers touched them? Prayer is an admirable practice, but it has to be supported by the “cross” of effort, practical action and personal inconvenience. What’s the point in praying for peace in the world while refusing to forgive my next door neighbor for insulting me or disturbing my peace with his loud music? I’m not prepared to put myself out to bring about on a small scale what I’m asking God to fix on a grand scale.

Similarly, it takes the “cross” of moral courage to challenge injustice in our places of work, to support a colleague who is the target of gossip, to take a stand against racial vilification.

As the rest of Matthew’s Gospel unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that Jesus is well and truly on a collision course with the religious authorities of his day. His moral integrity demands that he will continue to challenge their personal hypocrisy and their empty religious practice. He knows that fidelity to his mission will put his personal safety in jeopardy. Peter realises this and speaks out because he wants to shield Jesus from the danger that threatens him. For his efforts, he is sharply rebuked by Jesus who understands that violence of some kind awaits everyone who dares to confront authorities and systems that are built on injustice and abusive power. Jesus interprets Peter’s protest as a refusal to accept that suffering and death are possible consequences of the mission on which he has embarked. He therefore rebukes Peter for daring to suggest an easier and safer course, for offering personal safety ahead of moral integrity.

Jesus had grown to realise that living God’s dream for our world was something more than a walk in the park. He learned that God’s standards stretch us all. They send us on missions that sometimes look impossible. They disrupt our normal patterns of thinking and disturb our personal comfort. They put us at odds with people with whom we would otherwise prefer to party. They even have us talking with people whose righteousness either infuriates us or bores us to tears. He came to appreciate that living by God’s standards would involve suffering and risk to life and limb. He quickly learned that there are people who are distinctly uncomfortable with too much realism in their religion and that his own commitment to God would make enemies out of those who preferred to settle for distraction, for superstition or for organised silence. In today’s gospel, we see him attempting to pull back the veil on reality. He is pointing out that love has a cost, whether it’s gods or people whom one loves. Yet he does not let his realism descend into cynicism. Convinced that God is our main agenda, he keeps the focus there, lamenting that we will turn into empty shells if we shift our focus from God and the life God offers and opt for anything less: “Will a person gain anything if he wins the whole world but ruins his life?”

Going in search of pain and suffering is a sure sign of mental instability. It is equally unbalanced to entertain the thought that we can live with moral integrity, witness to truth and decency, treat all with respect and dignity without coming under the shadow of the Cross.