

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Jeremiah 20:7-9 / Matthew 16:21-27)
30.08.2020

Take up your Cross

Dear brothers and sisters,

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.” These words of Jesus addressed to his disciples more than two thousand years ago are addressed today by the same Master who calls each one of us to follow Him. If we want to be a disciple of Jesus, we have to renounce ourselves and take up our cross.

“Take up your Cross!” In his writings, Henri Nouwen underlines that Jesus did not say: ‘Make up your cross, or create you cross, or go after your cross’, but: “Take up your cross.” What is the nuance?

Let us take an example. We could think that ‘to take up our cross’ means to choose not to buy a ‘Mars Bar’ on Friday, as we do every other day we go shopping. We might imagine that to offer this small sacrifice to the Lord (Friday being the day when we remember the Lord’s passion and death for our salvation) is to bear the cross. To renounce a Mars Bar is not bad and the Lord appreciates that kind of act of love from us, but this is not what he means when he invites us ‘to take up our Cross’.

With ‘the Mars Bar sacrifice’, **we** create our cross, **we** take the initiative, **we** are in charge, **we** are in control; we are just trying in vain to save ourselves by our own efforts and our own good works. To the contrary, when Jesus invites us ‘to renounce ourselves and take up our cross’, He invites us to let go our self-will, our plans, even our praiseworthy spiritual desires, in order to be free to welcome all that is happening in our lives, all the events that, most of the time, we have not chosen. When Jesus says “take up your cross and follow me, he assures us that that we don’t carry our cross alone, relying solely on our own strength, but rather we do so with the Lord’s help. To take up our cross is to live to the full all the unexpected events of our lives – small or great – and to do so with God’s help.

Our lives are made up of a texture of joyful and painful events. Joyful events have to be received with gratitude. We can take everything for granted so easily! Painful events are never far from us: Long drawn-out illness and even terminal illness can appear suddenly within us or around us. How many of us suffer from a personal addiction or the addiction of a loved one. Those of us who are married or live in community know how misunderstandings and betrayals occur so very easily. We are called to come to terms with them, to forgive or to ask for forgiveness over and over again. This requires from us both humility and strength. To ask for forgiveness and to offer forgiveness cannot be avoided. It is never obvious and it is always painful, more or less. At the present moment, we cannot but think of our dealings with an unusual pandemic besieging us with all the legitimate fears it causes: fear of an eventual new lockdown and confinement, fear of the consequences of the economic downturn and maybe even a complete economic crash, fear of loosing our employment, etc...

To take up our cross is to consent to assuming all the events of our lives – the happy ones and the painful ones – as they arise and doing so with God’s help. We don’t choose these events, they are set before us. We don’t create our cross. The cross is given to us by life. We have to carry it.

Jesus did not create his cross. The cross was given to him as a consequence of his fidelity to the mission confided to him by his Father. No doubt Jesus had other ideas about the way to fulfil his mission, but he welcomed and fulfilled the way given to him by the circumstances set before Him. He accepted His cross and carried it with trust in His Father’s love and He did so out of love for us.

In the opening lines of today’s gospel passage, we heard Jesus say to his disciples: “The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously at the hand of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day”. Jesus suffered his passion and death for all of us, without exception, to reveal to each one of us that we are loved by the Father. To each one of us Christ promised a share in his resurrection, his victory over sin and death.

The Lord Jesus is qualified to help us carry our cross and our sufferings, because there is no human pain that He did not experience in his passion and death on the cross, and then overcome by his resurrection.

The good news is that in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, all our feelings of fear or loneliness, our many recurrent weaknesses, our brokenness, our experiences of violence and injustice, our sickness have been assumed. We may be a child, a teenager, a young adult, a mature or an elderly person; we may come from Mexico, the North or the South of Ireland, England or France; there is no hatred, anger, envy, pettiness or bitterness that has not been assumed, by which I mean totally transformed and indeed dissolved by the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus went through all these motions of life out of love. He invites us to do the same. To love is to give the first place to others and not to ourselves; it is to serve others before serving ourselves; it is to help others grow. Jesus is really the only one who can help us to carry our cross day after day. For that to happen, we have to consent to renounce relying on our own strength alone. For our transformation to happen, prayer is of the essence; prayer is the place where we receive the light and the strength we need to welcome that transforming power of Christ’s death and resurrection. . .

Let us give thanks to the Lord Jesus for his saving presence by our side, day after day, night after night. May the Lord forgive us for all the times when we forget his presence and try to manage with our lives on our own without his help! Let us come back again and again to the Lord’s presence which is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Amen.