

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Jeremiah 20:7-9 / Matthew 16:21-27)
03.09.2023
The mind of Christ

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” We have some very harsh words of Jesus here.

Clearly the issue raised by Peter’s word mattered a lot to Jesus and he could not let it pass without challenging the apostle. While he was moved by good intentions, the fact is that Peter’s statement was deeply offensive to the Lord’s identity and mission.

What does it mean to have our minds set on human things? According to St Paul, we can say, in a negative way, that to think in a purely human self-interested manner is to have a mind which is darkened (cf. Rm 1:21), blinded by the god of this world (cf. 2Co 4:4). This blindness of the mind deprives us of the ability to see the light of the Gospel (cf. 2Co 4:4) and it prevents us from living as Christians should. This last point is important because what is at stake is our daily living as Christians. To set our minds on God is not about having good intentions, pious thoughts or lofty considerations. As Jesus says at the end of our Gospel reading, it is about our behaviour, about the way we act. Benedict XVI sums this up very well when he writes: “The Christian's programme (...) is ‘a heart which sees’. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.” (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 31b).

For his part, Pope Francis suggests that: “having the same mind as Christ means thinking like him, loving like him, seeing like him, walking like him. It means doing what he did and with his same sentiments, with the sentiments of his Heart.” (*Hom.*, 03.01.2014)

When we decide to discern and to act according to a human way of thinking, we may be well-intentioned – like Peter – but we run the risk of becoming an obstacle to the Lord. The Greek word translated here by obstacle is *skandalon* which gives “scandal” in English; it means either “temptations that cause people to sin”, or “stumbling blocks that cause people to lose faith”.

To cause people to sin, to lose faith. We understand now why St Paul feels the need to insist on the fact that we must “be renewed in the spirit of our minds” (Eph 4:23; see Rm 12:2). Indeed, unless our minds are transformed, converted, we cannot discern “what is good and acceptable and perfect” in God’s sight (Rm 12:2).

Today our Gospel reading highlights one aspect of what it means to set our minds on divine things. According to Jesus, it entails taking up our cross, losing our lives for his sake.

To take up our cross and follow Christ is not only about courageously embracing the difficulties of life. If it were only that, it would be too individualistic. To take up our cross and follow Christ, and so to embrace the mind of Christ, is about doing what Christ did: it is about giving our lives to and for others.

You and I, today and every day, are invited by Jesus to imitate his example of generous self-giving. The radical conversion we must experience is to journey from petty self-centredness to magnanimous other-centredness. It is a radical conversion because the sin which is in us and in the world all around us speaks, voicing individualism, which is about I, me and myself. What matters, what comes first is my needs, my security, my rights, and sometimes even my country, my Church. This deceptive voice of self-reliance prevents us from listening to one another with respect. It makes us relate to one another as in a

competition whose goal is not the good of all but the good of a chosen few. It makes us believe that political leaders, countries or Churches can be turned into idols.

Unfortunately this voice is at work in some small, but very vocal areas, of our Churches. The danger for us is to yield to its demands and to become more and more polarised, more and more unable to dialogue and to deal properly with differences and disagreements.

Instead of listening to that voice, Jesus invites us to set our minds, to attune them to what a document on synodality calls the “music of the cross” (*Towards...*, p. 29).

It is only in following the path of the cross, in giving ourselves generously to God and to all, that we will be able to “recognise what is true and in harmony with God’s purpose and what is out of tune or strikes a false note” (*Id.*).

The lyrics which accompany the “music of the cross” are well known to us: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn 15:13) All this is about generous self-giving to and for others.

St Paul reminds us that “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2Co 9:6)

Each time we are petty in our self-giving, each time we are stingy with what we have – our time, skills and money –, as persons, Churches or countries, we shrink and impoverish ourselves, we do not truly live but just barely survive. The cross is the tree of life, it is firmly “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17) because only love begets life and only generous love begets fullness of life.

The war in Ukraine, the new UK Illegal Migration Bill, Brexit, the absence of local government in NI, the identity withdrawal which threatens some of our Christian communities, are all fear driven phenomena and stem from self-centred, blinded, and solely human based minds.

The words of St Paul to the Philippians are worth listening to over and over again, they should be written in our hearts and minds (cf. Heb 10:16), they show us what it means to think in God’s way: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 2:1-5)