

HOMILY SUNDAY 24 – B (Homily 02)\*  
“Living the Way of the Cross”  
(Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35)

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A woman back from shopping was showing her husband the expensive dress she had purchased. When he asked her why she bought a dress she did not really need, she replied that she couldn't resist the temptation. Her husband countered with the comment that she should have been like Jesus who told Satan to get behind him. She replied that she did that, and he said that it looked even better from behind!

“Whoever wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

The best way to live our Christian life is the Way of the Cross

The readings today focus on a topic that we would rather not think about, and that is suffering for the sake of our faith. In the first reading, we see the prophet Isaiah speaking of a servant of God who would be subjected to abuse, insult and mockery. Yet this suffering servant would bear it all with unflinching faith in God's presence in his suffering. What an insight he had into the future, into who Jesus would be and what would happen to him.

In the Gospel, Jesus knows he will be fulfilling that prophecy of Isaiah. He lays a double whammy on the apostles. The proclamation of faith in him as Messiah is followed by a prediction of the passion and then the teaching on taking up a cross. Poor Peter. He had just made the amazing first proclamation of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and now when he protests that suffering was not what he had in mind in making that proclamation, Jesus strongly rebukes him, even calls him Satan.

Actually, some commentators suggest that Jesus was speaking neither to Peter nor to the disciples. They maintain that Jesus was looking beyond Peter and the disciples to the invisible evil one lurking in the background, as he always does, and rebukes him for what would be his role, tempting the followers of Jesus to seek an easier, softer way.

From the beginning of the church, it seems that persecution and suffering were the characteristics that accompanied faith in Jesus Christ. In fact,

martyrdom was a constant fear and reality for the early followers of Jesus throughout the first three centuries of Christianity.

That reality is brought home to visitors to Rome who take the time to visit the catacombs. Especially striking is the statue of St. Cecilia in one of the catacombs located an hour's bus trip away from the Vatican. That silent stone statue proclaims her faith in Jesus to all who see it, a faith that is symbolic of three centuries of suffering by the early church. It is an awesome witness, a sobering witness.

However, when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the state within four hundred years of its inception, the suffering element became more elusive. Laws and civil society began to favor Christianity and made it easy, even favorable to be a Christian. Instinctively, however, those who took it seriously could see that it was also diluted and lost some of its fervor. The result was the development of monasticism which became the new way to live out a deeper following of Jesus. People who wanted to be martyrs for their faith became monks or nuns. The ascetical dimension was then provided by the vows of celibacy and a life of poverty and simplicity. The Way of the Cross was preserved by the early desert fathers and the monks up to the present day.

Our modern society, however, is marked by the attempt to live without the Cross. A strong individualism and secularism puts forward an agenda of selfishness, perhaps best exemplified in the philosophy of selfishness of Anne Ryand that has undergirded our economic systems and many believe has led to the present economic crisis.

There are many spin-off characteristics of this avoidance of the Cross that permeate especially our Western society. A slack dress code where immodesty is seen as normal; a lack of discipline of youth; an inability to wait for anything, especially genital sexual gratification; corruption in politics that is rampant; a lowering of morality and ethics in public life; an avoidance of inconvenience resulting in a contraceptive mentality, abortion and euthanasia; a loss of hope manifested in suicides and especially addictions of all kinds, including even religious addiction. All these are manifestations of a lack of any sense of a spirituality of the Cross.

In the second reading James affirms Isaiah's stance and the example of Jesus with a strong statement that all the faith in the world, all the apparitions, oily

statues, visions, oily hands, falling down when prayed over, rosaries turning colors, are meaningless unless accompanied by the most basic signs of love, of good works, of charity, such as taking time to listen to your children, apologizing to your spouse, dealing with your addictions and praying together as a family.

The invitation of Jesus to follow him by taking up our cross still stands. There are many modern day crosses waiting to be picked up: Working with the mentally challenged might be one; finding ways to be more welcoming to immigrants might be another. Gathering together on a beautiful Sunday morning to worship demands some sacrifice. Dealing with our own addictions and defects of character would certainly be a cross and source of healthy spiritual pain for many. Sacrificing some personal goals to spend quality time with one's spouse and family is a most laudable cross.

One of our lay leaders has a son, who along with his friend, are both drug and alcohol free. They have had the love, affirmation and support of their families which gave them the strength to resist the peer pressure and sometimes ridicule they have faced from their fellow students. This particular young man graduated as valedictorian for his class before his parents who were justly proud of him. That young man has been living a spirituality of the Cross.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is an invitation for us to live the way of Jesus, the Way of the Cross. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the love of Jesus demonstrated for us on the Cross is made present to us today, to strengthen us and form us into a new people of God who can live his new way of life, of unselfish love.

May our celebration today empower us to go out and live the Way of the Cross.

