

FR. JOHN'S HOMILY

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 30, 2020

There is a story of a person that complained too much to God about how heavy his cross was. He knew that God had made a mistake, and he had the wrong cross. Finally he complained so much, God told Peter to tend to this complainer. Peter went and asked what was wrong. "God has given me the wrong cross," the complainer said, "I would like a different cross." So Peter took him to a large room, and there were 1000's and 1000's of crosses. Peter said choose any one you like. So the complainer took his time, looking and gazing at all the crosses. They were of all sizes, shapes and made of many different materials. Some were very simple and some were very ornate. Finally after an exhaustive search, he made his choice. It was a small, lightweight, bamboo looking cross in the corner. Peter said, "Are you sure?" "Yes," said the complainer, "that is the one I want." "Well," Peter said, "son, that is your cross you set in the corner when you came in."

Sometimes we may think our crosses are too heavy to bear, until we realize that maybe our cross is small compared to others. We do need to trust God that whatever cross comes our way, by our own faults or by others, by situations we create or situations thrust upon us, there is no cross given to us that God will not help us carry. As we hear in 2 Corinthians 12:9, as Paul asked the Lord to remove the thorn in the side of his flesh, the Lord said to him, "Paul, my grace is sufficient for you." So too, we must know that God's grace is sufficient.

We know that being a Christian, a true follower of Jesus, that there has to be a cross in our lives. Otherwise Jesus says you cannot be my follower. What is my cross that I am asked to carry now? It might be: patient endurance of this Pandemic, not being able to be free like before, wearing a mask, concern for the future, unable to see sick family members in the hospital or nursing home, frustration in not being able to minister to people in the nursing homes and hospitals, having to communicate through the Internet, etc...

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, talks about false Christianity: worshiping the Church instead of God, being a follower of Jesus for political or social reasons, and some joining the trendy church but eventually fading away. Again in recent days, we have heard about many Christians no longer practicing the faith. We must admit following Jesus is hard and difficult. You have to be all in or there is no way one can make it through the narrow door, which is Jesus.

The Lord asks us to renounce ourselves, lose our life for His sake, carry our cross, and present our bodies as a holy sacrifice. None of this sounds pleasing or easy, and surely the Lord doesn't want us to devalue or demean our lives in any way. At first these commands seem to be negative. I think this is why Peter had a hard time receiving the news about Jesus prediction about His passion. We can see in Peter he didn't understand Jesus whom He just declared the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Now we know Peter didn't understand what this meant in God's plan of Redemption and Salvation.

We are no different than Peter until we realize that God's word is challenging us always out of complacency or with any notions of an easy way of life. What Peter was wanting is what we want many times, "cheap grace"— wanting salvation at a cut price and unwilling to involve ourselves in sacrifice.

We hear and see this often in the people and the world around us. We often want it for ourselves and the people we love, but we don't want them to suffer in any way. And yet this could be the very things God will use to bring them closer to him.

Look at the prophet Jeremiah in the First Reading today. He is now finding that being a messenger of God is too challenging and very difficult. So much so that he felt tricked and seduced by God now that he finds his life facing hardship and trials. He tried to deny it, but like he said, God's word was like a fire burning within. If he didn't speak, he would cease to be. However Jeremiah continued to follow the Lord in many a thankless task. He had fallen in love with God, so nothing held him back from doing God's will. No matter where this might lead, in being ridiculed, in jail, in being stoned.

I have talked about being ALL IN before. Otherwise one cannot complete the journey of faith. It will be impossible to walk in the steps of Jesus without being fully committed to Him. I remember when I was in Fayetteville, at St. Joseph's, we had a small cabinet of gifts, rosaries, crucifixes, and bibles for sale. A young lady called and wanted to buy a cross for her friend on her 16 birthday. I met her at the Church and showed her the crucifixes we had in the cabinet. Once she saw them she was horrified and could not believe that we would sell such a thing. She said, "What a terrible thing to sell! You still have Jesus on the cross." She had never seen one before. This is not what she wanted for her friend. "I want the cross without the body," she said. We are like her at times. We would like a nice cross with no body of Jesus, and we would like an easy cross.

Our "renunciation" today in Matthew's Gospel is not asking us to do anything that Jesus Himself didn't do. By accepting and embracing our crosses, we become more like Jesus who willingly accept the cross for us and for our salvation. And that is the reward for those who do accept their crosses like Jesus.

All growth, any lasting success and achievements demands effort and sacrifice. Yet the sacrifice can be a satisfying part of experience when one keeps their eyes on the prize. How else can these athletes give so much of themselves in their sport, for what: to be the best, be number one, win a trophy, receive money. Yet look at what they are willing to do. What are we willing to do for God?

We have something far greater than an earthly prize. We look forward in hope to the great reward of loyal service — when the Son of man, coming in glory, will reward all according to willingness and acceptance of our crosses.

There is a legend about Peter while in Rome when he got word that Romans were coming to get him. His fellow Christians told him to flee, before he is captured. He fled Rome. Going outside of the city limits, he sees someone walking toward Rome. It is Jesus. He asked Jesus, "Where are you going." Jesus answers, "To take up the cross you are running away from." Peter turns around, goes into Rome, and while they were crucifying him, he says his famous line, "Please turn me upside down, I am not worthy to die like my Master."

Peter is a great example of stumbling along the way of carrying his own cross. But in the end, he did trust God's grace to help him carry it. We too are called to trust in God's grace to help us carry our cross.