

SERMON NOTES – 13th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Sunday 30/08/2020

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Matthew 16:21-28 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.' ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. ²⁸ 'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

SERMON

The weight of the cross is heavy, but lifting such a weight strengthens faith

Fr Maximilian Kolbe, St's Peter, Paul and Mother Teresa, many of the disciples and even our own Mavis Parkinson share in various kinds of martyrdom, the surrendering of their life for God. This was the cross they were asked to carry.

Fr. Kolbe a Catholic Priest from Poland who during World War II, was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp because of his commitment to his faith, volunteered to replace a fellow prisoner who was to be executed by starvation.

St Mother Teresa, left a life of privilege and security to spend her life among the most forgotten of society as a carer and advocate among other roles.

The disciples Saints Peter, Paul and so many more in the face of physical and emotional persecution continued to spread the news of salvation through Christ, even to their deaths.

Mavis Parkinson, working as a teaching missionary in Papua New Guinea when given the opportunity to escape the onslaught of enemy forces, refused to leave those to whom she had committed herself. Her reasoning that to do so would show an absence of faith in God and the message she, with others, had been delivering.

Through the actions of these and many many more saints some recognised, others less so, we see the ultimate human price for following the call of our Lord, "to take up our Cross and follow him." For them being seen or honoured as martyrs was not what drove their decisions

and actions. Rather it was the desire to serve God in whatever way God called. To lift there cross.

How many of us can believe that we might be so ready to serve?

Thankfully very few of us will ever be called to carry such a burdensome cross but we are ALL called to carry a cross as part of the nature of our relationship with God. No relationship comes without cost. In human relationships this cost is often evident in the form of compromise, whether welcomed or forced.

Today's Gospel passage follows on from the watershed moment when in response to Jesus asking "Who do people say that I am." Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mt 16:16). What did Peter mean by this?

Christ or Christos is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, a word which simply means God's anointed One. In first century Judea a general view held was that there were three types of people who would be anointed: Prophets, Priests and Kings. In Jesus we find all three and this was the seismic shift for Peter, given he would have understood as a Jew that there is one God and never to worship a man as God. Peter in his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, also recognised that Jesus wasn't just human, but that he was also divine.

Jesus takes Peter's response and gives it meaning when he says;

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mt 16:24-26).

In other words if you are to be a follower of the Christ, a Christian, then there will be a cost. Throughout the history of the Christian church we see evidence of the cost this loyalty to Jesus has required.

Jim Eliot a missionary killed in Ecuador in 1955 paraphrased it like this

"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

As I said earlier, I doubt any of us to follow Christ will be asked to pay with the cross of martyrdom; But I wonder how "taking up our cross" might be relevant to us today.

Australia is not a Christian nation any more than it is Muslim or Hindu. The Australian constitution prevent any religious idea or institution being claimed as representing the State. Australia is in other words a secular state where each of us individually chooses whether we live as Christians or not. Some, myself included, would argue that to lead a life guided by the belief in and dictate of a divine reality such as the God of the faith is not easy. It runs contrary to our contemporary culture. How this plays out with the challenges it presents in our lives is what we can regard as cross we are called to carry.

The cross may change, our response to the call to carry it may change also however by identifying as Christians each of us in some way or another has chosen to follow the Christian way of life. But, having decided to follow Christ, what is the level of our commitment? What

does it mean to “take up our Cross and follow Him?” In the words of Reverend Dale¹ Do we follow Jesus some of the time, most of the time or all of the time?

Dale explains how through the first choice we are inclined to put the will of God at the forefront of our lives occasionally. From today’s Gospel where we observe Peter rebuking Christ in response to the news of suffering and death, we might infer that Peter is reluctant to accept a full relationship, he would prefer in fact demands only the comfortable aspects, the nice stuff be his lot. This was easy and fitted with Peter’s theology unlike the Cross.

In this state we are balancing our commitment to God with and against our commitment to our human life. We are likely to find ourselves rationalising how God will understand if we skip opportunities to spend time in worship or prayer for other commitments. Eventually other commitments become our focus.

The second choice putting God’s will foremost in our lives most of the time is better but still has us avoiding true commitment. Take the scene between Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin and his trial before Pilate. Peter when challenged, denies knowing Jesus three times, then as a rooster crows, Peter remembers Jesus prophesy, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times’. And he [Peter] went outside and wept bitterly” (Mt. 26:74&75)
Peter wanted to follow Jesus totally, but when it came to the crunch he gave in to the threat and retreated. The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. I know this feeling.

There are areas in all our lives, which we cannot completely give over and that is the nature of being human. We find ourselves wanting, like Peter to be totally committed , yet holding back. We are continually challenged as the Holy Spirit takes us back time and time again taking until we learn and commit.

The Third Choice is to put God’s will foremost in our lives all of the time

Just consider the difference of Peter from the time before the Crucifixion, where he denies knowing Jesus and after the Resurrection and Pentecost where Peter is now bold enough to preach the risen Lord, even before the hostility and threats of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin.

Even Jesus had the opportunity to chose how his relationship with his Father would turn out. Jesus did not want the cross he was give, but such was his faith that he was able to say “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me ; yet not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42)

At the beginning of this sermon I spoke of a number of people who in some way had choses freely to lift the cross God had placed before them. Each in some form gave their life not in a sporadic moment but in a consistent practice of love.

We as every person is are invited to follow in Jesus footsteps. Like him, we are called to be ready to take up our cross, whatever it may be, and carry it behind him. Importantly, Jesus tells the disciples to take up their own cross, not his. The cross will be different for each person; it takes the form of some difficult thing. Something not chosen but clear.

¹ *Jesus Said: If Any One Would Come After Me.....* Revd. Martin Dale (Aug 23, 2005) Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28

Only by uniting our suffering in life to that of Jesus can we carry our crosses. Only by accepting our cross and lifting it will we be strengthened and our faith grow. Amen