

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

One political party convention over—and one more to go. Many people are experiencing campaign fatigue, as our next election process seems to start almost as soon as the previous one is over. During the many months of campaigning for this election, it is typical for those running for office to make promises. Each candidate assures us that everyone will benefit if he/she is elected. Examples of this are phrases like, “*No new taxes*” or “*Health care for everyone*”.

One thing that you rarely hear candidates suggest is that people might have to make some sacrifices after the election. As a child, I remember hearing stories about World War II, and how everyone in the country had to chip in and make sacrifices for the war effort. This was before my time, but I remember getting the impression that everyone together had to sacrifice—that it was a national commitment. It was only after his election that John Kennedy said at his inaugural address: “*Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.*” It seems that today, in general, we are much more interested in what our country can do for us.

When you read the gospels it is clear that Jesus did not use this kind of campaign rhetoric. He promises plenty, but always at a price. Discipleship is not offered as a freebie. And so when he would say things like, “*You can only be my disciple if you take up your cross each day,*” the crowd would inevitable start thinning out. These particular words of Jesus are remembered as a kind of summation of his teaching. They are a treasure of wisdom because they prepare us for life.

As you know, Jesus was not big on making rules and laws. He was much more interested in the formation of proper attitudes—proper attitudes toward God, toward oneself, toward other human beings, and toward all of God’s creation. Jesus knew that to achieve proper behavior, forming the proper attitude is far more effective than making more laws. So we could ask today: what attitude is Jesus promoting when he talks about taking up one’s cross?

The attitude that Jesus wants his disciples to have is simply this: that life is not easy. Life is not meant to be easy. Probably the worst disservice that parents can ever do for their children is to give them the impression that life ought to be easy—yet, this often happens. In our technological age, many of life's drudgeries have been eliminated. These advancements can leave us with the impression, or even the hope, that a life without hardships or everyday challenges, is possible.

Jesus is more realistic. He assures us that human suffering is inevitable. But that is not his complete message. Jesus does not promise to eliminate hardships, but he does promise to give us the courage to face them. Jesus does not promise to take away life's burdens, but he does promise to develop our character to become strong enough to carry them. Jesus does not promise to take away all tears and sadness from our lives, but he does teach us to appreciate the benefits and blessings that we too often take for granted.

When Jesus talks about his own suffering and death, it is only natural for Peter to react in horror and dismay and to protest. Peter is his friend—what else would we expect? Jesus' answer is more of a surprise than Peter's protest. You wonder why he attacks Peter so vehemently. It is clear from this that the mission of Jesus is to show the power of love and trust in confronting evil and suffering. He has no other plan, no other purpose, no other answer to the continuing mystery of evil, except to witness in his own person that trust in the Eternal, and faith in a Power beyond all our suffering, is justified—even though the Voice from beyond sometimes seems silent, and the Power sometimes seems helpless to prevent suffering.

Many generations have taken Jesus at his word and have not been disappointed. Those who follow this approach often seem to achieve a sense of serenity and a sense of inner strength. Jesus himself followed this theory of trusting God, and the answer to his suffering and death was resurrection and new life. If we dare to live with this approach, facing trials and suffering long before death, Jesus promises that we can expect new life... even now!

In the second reading, Saint Paul suggests how we might live this more fully. He says, “*Do not conform yourself to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*” The renewal of our minds is linked with his notion of “*spiritual worship*” when he invites us to “*offer our bodies as a living sacrifice.*” Paul is building on the Jewish notion of sacrifice, where animals and agricultural products were offered to God on an altar. Paul then extends the notion of sacrifice to Jesus as “*the paschal lamb who has been slain*”. Paul then explains how we, too, can offer our lives in sacrifice to God. This is most often done by living lives of love. Joe Paprocki writes the following reflection in his book, “*Living the Mass: How One Hour a Week Can Change Your Life*”:

Every August for the last 15 years or so, my wife and I have sat down to complete the task of synchronizing our calendars. With school about to start, we need to mark down significant dates in the kid’s calendars, as well as our own. The overriding goal of this planning is to ensure that we can be present to our kids, especially at significant moments. Most of what a parent does can be summoned up by this phrase: being present. We are present to our children when they learn to walk, talk, and eventually ride a bike. We are present to them at graduations—pre-school, kindergarten, eighth grade, high school and college... Through it all, we want them to know that they are not alone—that they are loved, supported, and have our approval. Children make a lot of noise about wanting things, but ultimately what they want is their parents’ undivided attention and approval—in other words, their presence.”

To take up the cross is to make choices—to sort out our priorities like these parents do in order to be present to their family. Christ invites us to live a life of sacrifice out of a sense of conviction and hope that the demands of the cross will result in the new life of the Easter promise. In this Eucharist, we join with Christ in offering our lives, our bodies “*as a living sacrifice*” on the altar. In doing so, may we “*be transformed by the renewal of our minds*”.