

22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
HOW FAR ARE WE PREPARED TO GO WITH THE LORD

“If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt. 16: 24).

The Gospel of this Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A (Matt. 16: 21-27) presents two episodes that can be wrapped up in one theme of The Imperatives of Discipleship. This is the theme that runs through the entire Readings at today’s Eucharistic celebration. The first episode is very dramatic: Jesus, after affirming the profession of faith by Peter and making him the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) with the gift of the “keys of the kingdom of heaven”, began to intimate his disciples of the reality of the Cross in His life. This did not go down well with Peter, most likely, with all the others. So Peter “took Him aside and began to remonstrate with him.” Almost as saying to Jesus: *Come here, what are You talking about? You don’t know what You are saying.* He spoke to Jesus in these words: “This must not happen to You” (Matt. 16: 22). But Jesus turned and said to him: “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an obstacle in My path because the way you think is not God’s way, but man’s” (Matt. 16: 23). Let us get into the mind-set of Peter to understand what is going on here: Why did Peter say that? Like most Jews, Peter’s idea of a Messiah was triumphant. He conceived and believed that the Messiah would be a warrior, who would defeat and conqueror the Roman colonialists who lorded over the Chosen People. He thought of the Messiah in terms of an earthly king who would sit on “the throne of his ancestor, David.” Therefore, the idea of a suffering Messiah, a Messiah who would be handed over to the elders and put to death did not resonate in his mental reserve. His Messiah would be king, who punishes and kills; and not one who would suffer and die. Sometimes, the perception we have of Jesus can affect our relationship with Him, what we are prepared to do for Him, and how far we are ready to go with Him? Who is your Jesus – the Suffering Servant or the superstar?

“Get behind Me, Satan!”: Why did Jesus call Peter Satan? Jesus answered the question Himself: “You are an obstacle in My path because the way you think is not God’s way, but man’s.” The word *Satan* means is *The Adversary*. One that fights against or attacks us to deviate us from the path of God. Remember the Ancient Serpent in Genesis (3) that tempted Eve and Adam to deviate them from adherence to God’s instructions – that has always been the scheme of The Ancient Enemy. Satan is One who is opposed to God and His ways. Anyone who seduces or forces us to disobey God; who deflects us from God’s way; who obstructs us; who constitutes an obstacle in pious aspirations is considered Satan. This is what Peter’s action meant to Jesus – he thought and acted not like

God but as a man. We can experience this in different ways: family, friends, colleagues, teachers, and more. Notice one of the subtleties of Satan here: it was Peter, the one who has just been praised, whom Jesus, presumably might have been so much in love, that spoke remonstrated with the Master. How difficult it is for us to refuse to listen to the people we love. Most times, it is the ones we love who tempt us and we are most likely to fall when it comes from them. To understand the message of Jesus to Peter as it may further apply to us, we need to look at what Jesus said to Satan when he made his first appearance during the temptations. Jesus said: "Be gone, Satan!" (Matt. 4: 10). This means "Vamoose!" "Get out!" Jesus expelled and banished Satan from His presence. But here Jesus is saying to Peter: "Get behind Me!" This means "Follow Me!" Jesus commanded Peter to follow Him but not to go away. That is our position, to follow but not to lead. We are called to be Christ's followers.

How can we be followers of Christ: In the second part of the Gospel, Jesus sets out three conditions for discipleship or followership: "If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16: 24). Thus we can be followers of Jesus if we are prepared to meet these conditions:

1. ***"Let him renounce himself":*** This means self-denial. This means to let go of the things pleasing to the self and allow the God-principle to take over and guide. It means to surrender the ego for the power of God in our decisions. To deny oneself means to live a life of the God-choice all through our lives. It is a life of constant assent to the demands of God. Prophet Jeremiah in the First Reading (Jer. 20: 7-9) exemplified this in his personal life as he was "a daily laughing-stock, everybody's butt ... bearing insults, derision, all day long."
2. ***"And take up his cross":*** This is sacrificial. Taking one's cross means to freely accept to take on the burden of sacrifices. This means making choices that bring us no gains except to satisfy the needs of Christ. It practically refers to those moments you have to deny yourself some sleep to go for Mass in the morning; to volunteer services in the Church or the community or a hospice or an orphanage without any material reward. It implies to bear the brunt of persecution and to carry the marks of the wounded soldier of Christ.
3. ***"And follow Me":*** How far are we prepared to follow Jesus? To be a follower of Christ means to walk in the footsteps of Jesus all the way. It means constant attention and listening to His bidding and carrying out His directives. It implies asking and correctly answering the question "What would Jesus do?" in every situation of life. It means letting Him, The Light of the world, to be The Light on the paths of our lives. In the Second

Reading (Rom. 12: 1-2) St. Paul affirms this as he exhorts us to think and worship God “by offering your living body as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. And goes further to instruct: “Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind” (Rom 12: 2). This is how Jesus lived while on earth; as Christians, we are called to be imitators of our Lord and Master (1 Cor. 11: 1).

In the end, we shall come to realise that the best of life and the greatest gain in life is the one lived for, in and with the Lord. Whom do we listen to? How far are we prepared to go with the Lord? What do we sacrifice or have we been sacrificing for Him? Which life do we give the greatest assent to? What shall be our reward?

Let us conclude with the words of the prayers of St. Ignatius of Loyola, which captures our entire reflection in very profound thoughts: “Dearest Lord teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve; to give and not count the cost; to fight and not heed the wounds; to toil and not seek for rest; to labour and not ask for reward, except to know that I am doing your will.”