

Homily for the 24th Sunday, Sept. 13, 2009

Intro: When I conclude my reading of the gospel, I say, “The good news of the Lord.” When I conclude my homily, I generally say, “This is the good news.” And it is. But sometimes the good news contains hard messages, such as, “Whoever loves his father or mother more than me cannot be my disciple.” Or “Give to anyone who asks of you.” Today’s gospel gives the hardest saying of all, “Whoever wishes to be my disciples must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to hang on to his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake...will save it.” How can this be good news?

Isaiah’s first reading in today’s liturgy describes not just the fate of the suffering servant of God, but the fate of every prophet: “I have not turned back [from my prophetic message]. I surrendered my back to those who whipped me, my face I did not shield from fists and spittle.” Every one of the Old Testament prophets found his message rejected by his people, and most of them had to suffer physical and psychological abuse for God’s message which I spoke to them. Why did they have to suffer? Because sinful humans refuse to hear the way of salvation which God proclaims to them through the prophet.

Mark: The same is true even of God’s ultimate prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. Though he was the messiah, he understood that as a prophet he would be put to death for his message. But his death would not be the end; God would vindicate his life’s work by raising him from the dead.

When Peter protests that this should not happen to him, Jesus rebukes Peter: he is thinking as humans do, that saving our skin is the most important thing in life. Rather, Jesus tells all his disciples that they too must be willing to lose their lives for God’s way.

The Meaning for us today?

1. Like Peter, we don’t like the message. We believe that if we are good, God should reward us with money, honor, and a long life. If he doesn’t, we ask what we have done wrong. The gospel says that our poverty, others’ contempt for us, even our sickness may be a carrying of the cross which all Jesus’ disciples must bear.

2. Some say that carrying the cross is good for us because it disciplines our appetites and strengthens our will. Many religions are based on this theory. It may be that such asceticism does make us better. But that is not the reason why Jesus tells us we must carry our cross.

3. Jesus emptied himself of his divinity for love of us.

4. Jesus says that we carry the cross to love others. If we respond as the epistle of James says to the needs of our brothers and sisters without food and clothing, we will carry the cross of having less for ourselves. We give, not to make ourselves better, but to make others' lives better. Our carrying of the cross is not for ascetical purposes, but for altruistic ones.

5. Jesus says that his carrying of the cross to death brings salvation to our world. And our carrying the cross with Jesus is the way in which that salvation is experienced in our world today. To see someone telling the truth about corruption in his business, even if it costs him his job, strengthens the rest of us to tell the truth. When everyone tells the truth we all live better. To see a poor person give \$5 to a poorer person makes all of us more generous, and relieves the pain of the poor everywhere. To see someone sacrificing his own desires to care for an aged or sick relative or friend makes all of us more compassionate and caring for others. Finally, to see someone like Fr. Oscar Romero die for preaching the gospel to savage exploiters of poor campesinos strengthens the resolve of all of us to fight for justice to the underprivileged everywhere.

6. Of course we may not receive the rewards of our love in this life. Jesus did not. But, as he promised us in today's gospel, we will have eternal life with the Father, Son, and Spirit. Because living as Jesus did, and living as Jesus taught us, is to be Godlike...forever. The hard saying is good news, and we are the fortunate ones who hear it and follow it.