

## **24th Sunday in Year B**

**(Four sermons)**

### **WHY A SUFFERING MESSIAH**

**Mk 8:27-35**

A lady went into a Catholic repository and asked to buy a rosary without a cross attached. "It's for my friend," she explained. She doesn't like the cross, she thinks it's cruel." There are many people today who would like to take the cross out of Christianity. Peter in today's Gospel felt the same. He had just made his profession that Jesus was the Messiah. Then Jesus began to teach them what kind of Messiah He was going to be. He told them about the cross He was to carry and the death He would endure. Peter was horrified. At once he took Jesus aside and would not hear of it. Yes, he wanted a Messiah, a Redeemer, but not one who would suffer grievously and be put to death.

What was Our Lord's response? "Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but man's." Then He gathered all Apostles around Him and said, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me." In other words, Jesus is saying that if the thought of My cross horrifies you, let me tell you that you have your own cross to bear if you want to be My disciple. The cross stands at the very centre of the Christian faith. Without it Jesus would not have been the Messiah Who would save the world, and without us carry our cross alongside Him we cannot be His followers.

Why did Jesus have to suffer? It was to take away the sins of the world. Sin is a very real fact of life. Why do governments spend millions of pounds on a police force, law courts and prisons? The answer is because of sin! Why have nations made themselves bankrupt, making arms that are designed for no other purpose than to kill people? Again because of sin! Wherever people are to be found you will find sin. Sin is bad enough in what it does to the guilty, but it is at its worst in what it does to the innocent. It took the most beautiful life this world has ever known and nailed it to a tree. That is the true horror of sin. Because God forgives our sins so easily, and the penance we receive in the confessional is so small, we can take our sins so lightly. This must never be the case. Sin cost our Saviour a cruel death.

We must never make the mistake of being smug and separating ourselves from those who crucified Jesus. They may have actually nailed Him to the cross, but it was our sins of pride, greed, hatred, cowardice, jealousy, dishonesty, lust and selfishness which were responsible for His death.

Why was it necessary for Jesus to save us from our sins? We were so helpless and trapped by sin that we were quite unable to free ourselves. God our loving Father took pity on us and sent His Son into the world to share our human nature, being like us in everything except sin. Because He was both human and divine, He was the only one who could make adequate reparation to His Father on our behalf and restore us to God's friendship. In His divine nature He had the power to break the grip of sin and with His help we are able to free ourselves from sin.

How do we benefit from the sacrifice of Calvary that Jesus chose to make? The Mass is the representation of the sacrifice of Calvary. Whenever we come to Mass, we are given the opportunity of sharing His sacrifice. We offer ourselves alongside our brother Jesus. Because He is with us, we know that we are united to our Father. Through His sacrifice on Calvary Jesus stored up a treasure of grace and strength. All we have to do is to dip into it. We have only ourselves to blame if we don't draw on this source of strength.

Religion means much more than just going to Mass and worshipping in beautiful, comfortable churches and enjoying peaceful music. What we can forget is that religion also means carrying a cross. There can be no genuine Christianity without it. Jesus insists that anyone who wants to follow Him must share His sacrifice by taking up their own cross. Whatever we suffer in our lives, be it ill health or difficult relationships or hardships that the circumstances of life bring to us, whatever they may be, they can help towards our salvation. This is the only kind of Christianity that will break the grip of sin on our world. If we do not prepare to carry our cross, we are like the woman who tried to buy a rosary without the cross.

Lord Jesus, may we fight the Devil who wants us to remain in our sins and allow You to save us from our sins. Salvation can only come to us through Your Cross and by us carrying our cross alongside Yours.

### **THE CROSS IS ESSENTIAL TO THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN**

**Is, 50: 5-9; Mk 8: 27-35**

There are so many things to admire about Jesus. One of them is His calm and serene disposition throughout His life despite the fact that He knew what excruciating suffering was in store for Him. Our first reading from Isaiah foretold the suffering that was to come His way. When we witness the calm way He conducts His life, we would never have thought that He had any idea of the sufferings He was to endure.

When I was a young boy at boarding school, I dreaded receiving the strap which was given to us in our pyjamas before we retired for the night. I used to pray that if I ever got caught for breaking the rules it would be last thing at night. This meant that I would not have all day to brood over the punishment I would receive that evening. If I was caught in the morning I would have all those hours to brood over the fact that I had to face the punishment that was going to be meted out to me. This I hated. That was even worse than the punishment itself. Yet, Jesus who knew His future had years of knowing the awful torture He was to endure: the arrest, false trial, brutal scourging, crowning with thorns, carrying that heavy cross and being nailed to it, to mention just the physical suffering. Then there was the mental and spiritual suffering. And yet, He still led a peaceful life without a glimmer of the pain it would inflict on Him. That is what I call being really brave.

Suffering is part of every person's life who wishes to follow Christ. In today's Gospel Jesus announces, "If you wish to be a disciple of mine you must carry your cross and follow Me." Is it true that the majority of us are 'softies'? We don't want a hard, but easy life. When Jesus announced to the Apostles His future plight Peter would not accept it. When Jesus mentioned the cross, it conjured up the cruellest of all death and this was not to be for Christ.

Why do people have to suffer? This question has been asked time and time again in every generation. Jesus never directly answered that question but through His acceptance of His cross He gave suffering meaning and shows us the value of suffering.

Not one of us can escape suffering of one sort or another. Some people have to face physical suffering. Only recently I saw a tremendous change in a woman who was diagnosed with breast cancer. Before she received the news, she was a happy go lucky person but the news of the illness changed her whole outlook on life. She feared for her future and wondered how she would cope with the devastating news. For others the suffering is mental. A cloud of depression weighs heavily on them and they wonder if they will ever smile again. Counselling or tablets from the doctor just can't shift this dark cloud that envelopes them. For others their suffering is spiritual. They are plagued with

guilt. They just can't forgive themselves for what they have done. No amount of times of mentioning it in confession can ease the pain their sin has caused.

Whatever suffering we have to endure, be it physical, mental or spiritual, we have to look at our Master and see how He faced and endured suffering as no one else did. We see Him encouraging us to take up our cross and follow Him. His acceptance and endurance of the cross brought about our salvation. We must never waste suffering. We will never know what our acceptance of our cross will do. Each cross we endure is a rung on the ladder leading us to Heaven.

For many of us we don't have to look for crosses. The circumstances of life hand them to us. For parents, it can be the cost of rearing their children; trying to meet their financial demands. Their children's peers have so much more than their children and they can't afford to buy the same things for them. Then there is the worry of how to cope with wayward headstrong teenagers. For wives, the cross could be how to cope with a drunken or gambling or unfaithful husband. For a husband, it could be living with a lazy wife. For teenagers, it may be the endless task of finding work and being rejected because they have no work experience.

Jesus makes it crystal clear about the high cost of being one of His followers and never at any time did He pretend that it is less than demanding. Suffering is the blood, sweat and tears of life. The cross, which is planted in the centre of Christian living, is not an invitation to lead a miserable life but an exciting challenge, a call to express our love for God and to grow in His love.

Lord Jesus, there is no doubt that Your way of doing things run contrary to our expectations. Let us not be numbered among those who would like to throw the cross out of Christianity. To be Your follower we must accept, embrace our cross, unite it with that of Yours and so rise to glory as You did.

## **HOW TO LIVE LIFE FOR GOD'S SAKE AND FOR OURS**

### **Mk. 8:27-35**

The dictionary tells us that a paradox is a self-contradictory statement. In His teaching Jesus often said something that seemed contradictory but used it to drive home an unforgettable truth.

Perhaps His most widely quoted paradox is the one that appears in today's Gospel reading, "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake will save it." Jesus was telling the truth about life. That's the way life really is. Try to hang on to life, hoard it; you lose it. Give it away; and you will find it. Between these two opposites, self-saving and self-losing, lies the conflict that is going on in every one of us. Our inclination is to hold on to life and keep it for ourselves, but Jesus said the only real way to live is to lose it.

He gave us the perfect example of losing life at the Last Supper by washing the feet of His Apostles. It was the custom to wash the guest's feet on entering a house after a journey but His little company of friends had no servants. It would appear on the night when Jesus was having His last meal with them that none wanted to do this task. So, Jesus washed their feet.

"Do you understand what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and you call Me Lord, and you are quite right to do so, for so I am. If then I, the Teacher and Lord have washed your feet, so you ought to wash each other's feet, for I have given you an example that as I have done to you, you, too, should do to each other."

The Apostles by being selfish and self-centred created more problems for themselves than if they had been generous. What a happier atmosphere it would have been for Jesus, and all of them, if one of them had volunteered to do this act of charity.

It is the clear Christian conviction that being self-centred is the essence of all our problems. The root sin, the father of all sins, is this inclination to put self at the centre of life and make everything else revolve around us. We are born self-centred because we were conceived in original sin. As infants our interests were all that mattered. Everything existed for us. When that attitude is carried into adulthood the consequences are tragic, both for the individual and for everyone else. We go through life saying, 'I want what I want when I want it' and that means 'I really don't care what effect that may have on other people.'

The irony is that this approach to life destroys the very thing that it seeks. When we exalt ourselves, we diminish ourselves. When we put ourselves at the centre, then life gets lopsided and it eventually makes us miserable because we are not going to have our way. This is what happened to Saul, the first king of Israel. He became so hungry for power and popularity that, when he felt himself losing both, he died in despair on the point of his own spear.

The Gospel's answer is 'Forget yourself, lose yourself, give yourself.' It is then that we find our true selves, become our best selves, only when we get self out of the centre and put the interests of God and others there. How paradoxical! But it is true. The happiest people we know are those least preoccupied with themselves.

Let's consider one other thing, and that is the deliverance from self-preservation. It is said that survival is the first law of nature. Most of us instinctively hold on to our life on Earth for as long as we can. Yet, there are some generous and unselfish people who knowingly and willingly will give up their lives for something they believe in or someone they love.

The beatification ceremony of the Conventual Franciscan Fr. Maximilian Kolbe was held in 1971. Arrested by the Nazis in 1941 he was in Auschwitz when 10 prisoners were chosen for execution as reprisal for the escape of another prisoner. Fr. Kolbe offered to take the place of one of them who was married. The offer was accepted. Here was a generous man who gave us his life for another!

During that ceremony a white-haired man embraced by Pope Paul VI wept audibly. He was Franciszek Gajowniczek, the prisoner-set-free, who was sure to remember the words of Jesus, "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Survival may be the first law of nature but there is a higher law – the law of love that leads to life. Saint Maximilian Kolbe lived by that law. You and I must do the same. We may never be called upon to demonstrate it so dramatically but in the day-to-day routine of living we are either finding it or losing it. The selfish man is the shrinking man, his world growing smaller and smaller, emptier and emptier, until he abides alone. The giving man is the living man, his world growing larger and larger, his circle of interests wider and wider, his life richer and richer.

Lord Jesus, give each one of us a genuine experience of life, a full life – which we can only gain if we follow You. "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for My sake, and the sake of the Gospel, will find it."

## **THE CROSS A PART OF LIFE**

### **Mk. 8:27-35**

In our Gospel reading, Jesus told His Apostles for the first time that He was going to die by being crucified. It was like dropping a bombshell. The thought of Him being crucified could

not have been farther from their minds. Jesus and the Apostles were on one of those rare occasions when they had escaped the crowds and were on their own. Jesus guided the conversation in the direction He wanted it to go. He began by inquiring whom people thought He was. One said they thought he was John the Baptist, another Elijah and another one of the prophets. Now came the important question, "Who do you say I am?" Immediately Peter spoke up on their behalf, "You are the Christ."

We have read this Gospel passage many times and perhaps we do not realise the full impact it had on the Apostles. Peter probably said those words with a lump in his throat. The Apostles hoped, even dared to believe that this Galilean Carpenter might be the long-awaited redeemer, spoken of by the prophets. Now they were sure of it. Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Saviour sent by God. In their minds it was only a matter of time, weeks and months, for Israel to be restored to her former glory and the Kingdom of God would come on earth. This had been their longing.

In the midst of this euphoria and expectation Jesus was to drop the bombshell. He began to teach them that He had to suffer, be rejected by His own people and die. They were shocked, bewildered, even angered. He didn't stop there He went on to tell them that the cross was to be a part of their lives. They must have thought this is a very strange kind of saviour who would die on a cross and would ask His followers to carry their cross behind Him. When you stop to think about it, how else could it be? What other redemption is there for this world where good and evil exist side by side? Good has constantly to be battling against evil. We can put people in one of two categories, the selfish and the unselfish, the takers and the givers. It is the unselfish and givers who have to make up for the selfish and the takers.

What is Calvary all about? It is about the Saviour of the world dying on the cross to break the cycle of sin and to make up for the selfishness of those who always take and don't give. Now if we want to unite ourselves with the work of our Saviour we too have to carry our cross behind Him. Take our homes. A father may be thoughtless of the needs of his wife, never gives his children his time, and is bad-tempered and moody. You may get a mother who neglects the home and has only bingo and her social life on her mind. You may get children who are disobedient, sullen and uncooperative. These are the selfish ones, the takers. Whenever this happens to bring about the balance, other members of the family have to carry the cross to make up for their failures.

If we move from the home into the wider world, we see the same truth applies to other relationships and responsibilities. There are those who shirk work and others who carry them. The same is true of the Church. Some people only use the Church. They seldom, if ever, think of it except to baptise their babies, marry their young, and bury their dead. Their chief concern is what the Church can do for them. Do they ever think that their commitment should be far more than that? Others love the Church and give themselves to it. Week in and week out, they help to support it with their prayers, their presence, their gifts and the quality of their living. You will find the selfish everywhere. Their attitude is always, "What's in it for me?" Whereas the unselfish have their sleeves rolled up and they say, "What can I do to help?"

There is no way we can remain neutral. The cross is more than an ancient instrument of death. Jesus teaches us it is a way of life. When Jesus died on the cross 2,000 years ago, He let something loose in the world from which no one can escape. Try as we might we can never quite forget what He did, and always there is that uneasy feeling that somehow we are involved. There are times when we wish the cross would go away and leave us alone. This is never going to happen; Jesus reminds us that it is too much a part of living. Everywhere

we look, there are the selfish and the unselfish. There is no middle ground. We are involved whether we like it or not. Our only choice concerns the nature of our involvement.

Lord Jesus, You carried Your Cross. Now You expect us to carry ours behind You. May we never forget Your words, "If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For anyone who loses his life for My sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it."