

HOMILY SUNDAY 24 – B
“The Cross Way to Glory”
(Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:114-18; Mark 8:27-35)

The late Woodrow Wilson was the son of a minister. His father, who was tall and very thin, would often take young Woodrow with him on his parish calls, which he made with a horse and buggy. One day, on one of these calls, a parishioner asked: "Reverend, how is it that you're so thin and gaunt, while your horse is so fat and sleek?" Before the father could reply, young Woodrow said, "Probably because my father feeds the horse and the congregation feeds my father."

A young man was tired of the cross that he had been given to carry. He walked into a Cross Shop to exchange it for another. Putting his cross down, he tried out many crosses, but none suited him – they were all either too long or short, too heavy or light, too rough or slippery. Finally he picked one up that seemed just right and chose that one. The owner of the store remarked that was very interesting, because that was the one he carried in!

Is it not true that the deepest lessons we have learned in life involved some suffering?

To follow Jesus, we must learn the meaning of redemptive suffering.

The gospel proclaimed today is a turning point in the gospel of Mark. Peter is finally able to identify Jesus as the Messiah, but that confession will be misunderstood if suffering is not seen as the central truth about the identity of Jesus. The second half of the gospel completes the initial confession that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God with the threefold prediction of the passion. Peter cannot understand that suffering lies at the heart of Jesus' mission, thus provoking Jesus to respond strongly, and confronting us with the mystery of the Cross.

The Son of Man does not just identify with the suffering righteous from the distance of heaven, but actually experiences their plight. The imperative “must” conveys a divinely established plan. The necessity involved is not cruel, blind fate. Jesus suffers out of obedience to God. It is his intimate relationship of love with the Father that enables him to trust that he will be raised up to a new life that he will share with those who believe in Him. His faith in the Father's love makes him willing to accept what God chooses.

The message is clear – to follow Jesus we must learn that the cross is a blessing; that the glory of God comes only through the Cross of Jesus Christ; that some of life's deepest lessons are learned only through suffering. We must be able to express our faith, not just through works, but also through the acceptance of some suffering, some cross.

The necessity of suffering is not simply a pious desire to imitate Jesus. Much of what is truly worthwhile can be accomplished only by those who are willing to trust Jesus' word that suffering belongs to God's plan, something difficult to achieve in a “Pain-killer” culture. We are challenged to think as Jesus does. God does not delight in suffering –

after all, the disciples were sent to preach and to heal. The danger is to think that suffering is always undesirable, and that if we pray enough, God will remove all suffering from our lives and fix all our problems. Many Christians have grasped the Jesus of the miracles but have ignored the Word of the Cross. Prayer is important in healing, but prayer at its deepest is an opening up of our selves to what God wills, not an exercise in forcing God to do our will.

Joe Meehan is an example of someone who understood, accepted and lived the mystery of the Cross.

Joe was a humble, intelligent, articulate teacher in the Catholic School system in North Battleford with a great zest for life. He had a scientific bent and was interested in nature and ecology. Collaborating with others, he wrote a series of illustrated booklets on the birds, plants and animals of the Saskatchewan River valley. He enjoyed French Intensive gardening and working on his computer.

Joe was very generous with his time and energy and close to his family and friends. As a Christopher from way back, he gave up a weekend to take an instructor's seminar in Edmonton and help us get the course started, one night a week for ten weeks, as a generous response to our need in our ministry around the Battlefords. He also had a great love for the First Nations peoples and a deep appreciation of their spirituality.

Joe and Rhena spent three years as part of a basic Christian community in the States in an attempt to experience the ideal of Christian living expressed in Acts 4: "*All things were held in common, in unity and love, and no one was in need.*"

Just before retirement, he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. Naturally, he was at first shocked and saddened by this news, especially as he learned more about the disease and what it would do to him. He would slowly lose all his motor functions yet remain completely aware of what would be happening. In the end he would be able to communicate only with his eyebrows, and die from lungs filling with fluid, akin to drowning.

Then his faith kicked in. Through prayer and much support, especially from his wife Rhena, Joe was able to accept this cross, this suffering, this new reality in his life, resolve to make the most of the time he had left, and live each moment to the fullest. He continued functioning to the maximum of his dwindling ability without complaining, and even went to Scotland on his own with the help of a walker to trace his ancestry.

I had supper with Joe and Rhena after it was obvious that the disease was starting to affect him. I was wondering how I could broach the topic of his illness when he suddenly, in a matter-of-fact way, asked me if I would preside at his funeral. It was all arranged, he told me. A deacon friend of his would preach. There would be a celebration of the Eucharist in the morning, followed by cremation, and an ecumenical service in the evening.

I almost dropped my fork in shock, and then we had a beautiful conversation about illness, dying and possible attitudes towards both. At the end of the evening, I was so moved by their faith that I asked them to bless me before I left.

Each visit after that would find Joe weaker and weaker, but his spirit remained staunch and strong. He expressed his deep interest in ecumenism, in good liturgy, and his respect for other faiths. He even showed me a picture of a Buddhist monk praying at a stone cairn that some friends had built for him in Tibet.

A week before he died, I visited him at the Battleford District Health Center. We jokingly talked about whether or not I would be able to make it to his funeral with my rather tight schedule, as I did not know when it would be. He shared that he had almost died a week earlier, and that it was not his call. We would both have to pray and hope that it would work out.

When I got the message that he had died, and that the funeral would be Tuesday or Wednesday, I checked my schedule and lo and behold, I would be a few hours away from North Battleford on Monday, and Tuesday was free. It would work out, and I am still convinced this was not just coincidence, that somehow Joe and God arranged it!

The previous spring, I started a plot garden in The Pas following Joe's example. I called Rhena before Joe died and asked her to tell Joe that I had named it the Joe Meehan memorial garden. I think he enjoyed that. Rhena tells me that he wanted to leave his footprint on earth and he has, two big ones, each 30 feet long and 4 feet wide, in The Pas.

In so many ways Joe's strong faith in God was evident and exemplary: his caring for Catholic education as a teacher at JP II High School, and his long-suffering patience are just two examples. Rhena tells me that even as he lay in bed in pain, he would murmur to himself, "God is good. God is good."

The Eucharist we celebrate today is a celebration of the new life that flows from the death of Jesus on the cross for us. It is our food for the journey of faith through the cross to new life as well.

May our celebration today deepen our commitment to journey, in peace and yes, even joy, through the crosses life gives to us, to the glory of God.