

HOMILY SUNDAY 29 – B (Homily 02)

“Give Your Life Away”

(Isaiah 53:4, 10-11; Ps 33; Heb 4:14-16; Mk 10:39-45)

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“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

That statement of Jesus from the gospel captures the essence of the readings today: as his disciples, we are to follow him into lives of selfless service that may involve suffering.

The prophet Isaiah in the first reading prepares the ground for this hard teaching. He speaks of a servant of God who will be crushed with pain, whose life will be an offering for sin; a faithful servant who will bear the iniquities of others, whose sacrificial life will make amends for the weakness of others.

No wonder the Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus did not recognize him nor accept him. This was not the kind of leader, the kind of messiah they wanted or expected. They had manipulated religion into a self-serving system that gave them possession, prestige and power. This description of the future messiah was not on their radar screen. As experts in the scriptures, they must have been in some kind of religious denial not to make the connection with Jesus.

But it was not only the Jewish leaders who had trouble accepting a humble, compassionate suffering-servant messiah. In the gospel, we see that even the disciples of Jesus were infected with this all too human tendency to lust after possessions, prestige and power. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” was the request of James and John. The other ten disciples weren’t much better. They slipped into anger and jealousy when they heard about the brothers’ request.

So Jesus had some teaching to do, and teach them he did. His followers were to be unique among all the Gentiles, who were all into possessions, prestige and power. By contrast, following Jesus meant to live as he did, to be humble, faithful to the will of God, to give one’s life in selfless loving service. The first would be last; the greatest would be the least.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews knows how impossible a task that would be for the average disciple, so he hastens to remind us that we don't do this alone. We have a great high priest who became one of us, who suffered in every way that we have, and will give us the grace and power we need to be a carbon copy of the master, who came to give his life as a ransom for many.

The year of the priest that was declared by Pope Benedict is a privileged time for all priests, bishops, and pastoral ministers in the Church, to reflect on how we are carrying out our ministry. There is a cryptic saying that appeared recently in an article: "Clericalism is about power; priesthood is about service." There in a nutshell is the essence of the struggle facing the disciples, and facing any of us who seek to minister in the Church. There is no room for power struggles, for jealousy, for competition, that all too often mar relationships in the Church and sometimes even turn people off from attending church.

The saintly Mother Theresa of Calcutta is an example of one who lived a selfless life to the full. She would even go to where abortions were being performed in India to try to dissuade women from going through with the procedure, offering to look after the unborn child herself, no matter what the cost. That is genuine discipleship.

In one of our communities recently, I met a young couple named Eric and Velma. Velma had been in an accident nine years earlier and was now a paraplegic in a wheel chair, able only to move her head and to talk. Eric had brought her to church, and then to the reception after confirmation. I marveled at how attentive he was to her, and how he was quietly feeding her like a child as he ate his own meal. In my conversation with them, I learned that they were planning to be married soon, and I was astounded. How many of us would choose to make a life-time commitment to a paraplegic? It would be different if that happened after marriage, but in this case, Eric would be committing himself to caring for a paraplegic for the rest of his or her life. That was amazing grace, and a beautiful example of what Jesus is teaching us in the gospel: we are to serve and give our lives as a ransom for many. And in that loving and faith-filled commitment, we will find joy, as I saw in Eric that day.

In the Eucharist that we celebrate now, we listen to Jesus' Word teaching us his way of life, and then we receive his Body and Blood which makes present that selfless love he displayed for us on the Cross.

So remember that statement of Jesus from the gospel today that captures the essence of discipleship: we are to follow Jesus into lives of selfless service that may involve suffering.