

## Homily-Costly Grace

The readings in today's liturgy speak of **the cost of hearing and following God's word.**

Each of us has experienced the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. This experience may have come in trying to reconcile with a friend or spouse, turning away from sin or being willing to serve others in the midst of a busy schedule.

I came to understand the cost of discipleship when I was Director of Church Vocations for our diocese. During my time as Vocation Director there were few seminarians. Each morning as I started the day I had a sense of frustration at the lack of visible success from my efforts. I put much work into helping men and women discern their vocation and yet very few men and women decided to begin seminary studies or to enter the convent. In the midst of this feeling of frustration I did not slow down in my efforts to plan events in order to get the word out about vocations. For me this liturgy is both about the cost of discipleship and our call to remain faithful as we follow Christ.

Jeremiah 20:7-9

In the first reading we get a sense of the interior crisis in the life of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was hated by the king and the other prophets. He was humiliated by the people of his time for speaking God's difficult word. Therefore, he laments his call. He begins by stating that God has duped him and he let himself be duped. God deceived him and he let himself be deceived. He then speaks of the Lord seizing and prevailing over him. Jeremiah has been sent to "root up and tear down, to build and to plant." Jeremiah is angry at God because his efforts to root up and tear down have caused great hatred against him. He muses that he will no longer speak the word of God. Yet he cannot abandon his prophetic mission. It is a fire which burns in his heart. **Jeremiah did not want to accept suffering. It was the cost of being faithful to God.** Jeremiah remains faithful to God's word and yet his words continue to fuel persecution against him.

Romans 12:1-2

Paul exhorts the community of Rome to live a pattern of life responsive to the hearing of the Gospel. Believers are to offer their bodies as a "living sacrifice" to God. The bodily life embraces the entire existence of believers, with particular emphasis upon interrelatedness within the community and interaction with the surrounding external world. Obedience of life, rather than specific ritual gestures, constitute for believers the true essence of worship.

Life is to be lived as a sacrificial consecration to God. For Paul this means that the life of the Christian is not to be conformed to this world. Christians live in the overlap of the ages. The new age inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ has become palpable in the experience of the Spirit, attesting a new relationship with God. In their bodies believers feel and suffer the onslaughts of the old era. They have to live out the values of the new era—especially in relation to God and fellow human beings—in the conditions of the old.

They must allow their “minds” to undergo the renewal of existence that life in the new era involves. Mind for Paul denotes the thinking, discerning aspect of the human person. As such it is morally neutral: it can sink to the level of the fallen age, or it can partake of the new.

Christian obedience involves a constant quest for God’s will in the confusing and difficult circumstances of the present, “overlap time.”

Believers did not have to be instructed by the Law nor go to a temple to offer sacrifice to God. Their renewed mind creates in them the capacity to discern what is required to live according to God’s will. The bodily obedience flowing from that discernment makes their lives a continual sacrifice pleasing to God.

Paul describes Christian life as “a living sacrifice” and as “spiritual worship.” Using the language of sacrifice from the Greco Roman world Paul challenges them to make themselves living sacrifices and turn their entire lives into acts of worship. Then he calls them to live out their new identity that they received in baptism and to discern what is good, pleasing and perfect before God.

## **GOSPEL**

In order to understand today’s Gospel we must understand the cross as did the people of the day of Jesus. For us the cross is the chief symbol of identity and hope. In the Greco Roman world the cross was a symbol of great suffering and shame. In the Roman world it was the punishment for rebels and slaves. It was a public event meant to deter troublemakers from rebellion or crime. For people in Jesus’ time it represented suffering and shame and not identity and hope.

Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ comment that he was to be crucified represented the horror with which crucifixion was regarded. Peter had to learn that God’s way is not always our way and that in Jesus’ case (and at times in our case) the way of the cross is God’s way and the cross can be an image of identity and hope.

Last week Jesus wanted to make sure that people understood who he was. Therefore he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man?" The disciples said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus affirms that answer by stating that Peter's answer was revealed by God and so Jesus declares that Peter is rock and on this rock Jesus will build his Church.

In the Gospel of today Jesus explains to the disciples what type of Messiah he is. Jesus says that he is not a majestic Messiah but instead a Messiah that must suffer and die and only then rise from the dead.

Peter's reaction is one of shock. "God, forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Peter does not believe that Jesus should have to experience this amount of suffering and shame. Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling stone to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus tells Peter that he is now an obstacle to Jesus' living out his mission of resurrection through suffering and death.

Many Christians have the view that Christianity is built on God's bringing complete joy and prosperity into the lives of Christians. Those of you who have evacuated from the Gulf Coast and who celebrate this Mass with us are testimony to the fact that part of being a Christian is carrying the cross of Christ. Christianity is not only about joy and being blessed by God. Christianity is also about sacrifice and at times means dying to ourselves.

Jesus says to the disciples, "If any of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Denying oneself means displacing oneself from the center of consciousness while looking to the true self embodied by Jesus' teaching. The self that is lost is the autonomous individual that is so dear to consciousness. The self that is found is the true life of following Christ with one's whole life and turning away from sin and anything or person that would keep us from Christ. The reading calls us to take up our cross if we are to follow Christ. Carrying one's cross is accepting sacrifice in our lives faithfully. God gives each of us crosses in order for us to follow him. Key to this reading is that we are called to carry our crosses faithfully. I believe that not only do we carry our crosses in life but that now Christ helps us carry our cross.

The theologian whose life best speaks to this reading is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian during the Second World War. He took a stand against Hitler and ultimately was hung for his beliefs. He wrote about what he called "costly grace." According to Bonhoeffer there is a cost to discipleship. But following Christ leads to the only true life. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Christ and demands our entire lives. The disciple places his entire life in the hands of God and is obedient to the will of God. Discipleship cuts us off from our former way of life. Bonhoeffer understands denial to mean choosing Jesus and following Jesus closely with our lives. Bonhoeffer reminds us that if we lose our lives through following Christ we find our lives in the fellowship of Jesus Christ.

Jesus invites Peter into the paradoxical mystery of the cross. By plunging ourselves into the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism, we find new freedom from the false masters who seek to rule over us and keep us enslaved. By taking up the cross along with Jesus, we too can conquer death and live in the kingdom of God. The cross is the chief symbol of Christian hope as it points us toward eternal life with God.

The startling transformation of the cross as a symbol of hope came about through Jesus' death and resurrection. We must remember that the passion predictions are also resurrection predictions. Without the cross there would be no resurrection. The cross as the central Christian mystery takes in the entire paschal mystery and issues in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

The hope of the Christian life is not only that at the end of life we receive eternal life in union with God but also that through our relationship with Christ and as a result of the resurrection our new life begins now. If we are faithful to Christ during our suffering and death we experience new life and growth. The cross becomes the tree of life for us as a result of the resurrection. Christian hope comes from Christ's presence in our lives and through his support and grace. Christ brings new life out of the experiences of sacrifice in our lives. Let us give thanks for the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ in our lives.