

TWENTY- SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A
THEME: **THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP**

The readings for this Mass remind us that Christian discipleship demands honesty, the willingness to suffer, generosity and readiness to follow Jesus by obeying his commandment of love.

Our readings today explain how this Christian mission should be accomplished. Jeremiah, in the first reading, is certainly a prototype of the suffering Christ. In our second reading, St. Paul advises the Romans and all of us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, by explicitly rejecting the ungodly behavior of the world around us and by discerning and doing the will of God.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus takes his disciples by surprise when, after Peter's great profession of faith, he announces that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the hands of the elders, the chief priest and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. After correcting Peter's protest, Jesus announces the three conditions for Christian discipleship: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.

Some time ago when I was in Nigeria, there was this advertisement on the television by one of the "new generation" Churches. It said in part, "Come to Eagle's Square. As soon as you step into that square, all your problems will vanish." I asked myself what was being advertised. Was it a religion, the Christian religion or rather a commercial product, "a pain killer", like Panadol or Aleve? "Take two Panadol tablets and your headache will vanish at once."

That was not how Jesus advertised Christianity. Our Gospel reading today tells us how Jesus advertised Christianity: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it."

It follows that the cross is part and parcel of the Christian religion. A cross-less Christianity does not exist; it has not yet been invented. If it were possible to be a Christian without carrying the cross, Jesus would most certainly have shown us how. Rather he himself carried his own cross all the way to Calvary. He drank the cup of suffering to the dregs, and invited his followers to take up their own cross and follow him on that same road. That road led to his resurrection and glorification. The same road will lead to our own resurrection and glorification. No other road will lead us there.

The Gospel of Christ is like a coin with two sides: the cross and the crown. If we try to embrace one side, the glorious side, and reject the other, the suffering side, we falsify the Gospel. The same Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" also said "If anyone wants to become a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Do we come to Jesus to be freed from our burdens or do we come to Jesus to take on the cross?

We should come to Jesus to be freed from our meaningless and futile burdens and, take on the cross that leads to salvation and glory.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, today's Gospel challenges us to say no to the very attractive but one-sided worldly gospel of instant glory, a sugar-coated gospel that offers a false promise of “no cross, all crown.” Have you ever heard it on the television: “Only believe and everything will be bed of roses for you?” Everything was not bed of roses for Jesus; he still had to endure the cross. Everything was not bed of roses for Mary; a sword of sorrow still pierced her soul. Everything was not bed of roses for Jeremiah in our first reading today. Everything was not bed of roses for the countless men and women saints who have gone before us.

Why then should it all be bed of roses for you and me? In the face of disappointment, bereavement, sickness, ingratitude and failure, our faith response should not be to ask “why me?” but to recognize that these crosses and contradictions are the necessary condition for our future glory. The world is the place for the cross. The place for the crown is heaven.