

Homily of Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A, 2023

Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63:2-9; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-27

We are all carrying various kinds of crosses. That is why Jesus invites us, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Matthew 11:28-30). In today's gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

Our crosses are our afflictions, difficulties, trials, temptations, responsibilities, and keeping God's commandments. In the first reading, Prophet Jeremiah's cross was his responsibility to prophesy to his people, their rejection of him, and the persecution he suffered in their hands. The first reading was a time Jeremiah felt that God was silent. He felt that God had not fulfilled his word to him when he called him.

When God called Jeremiah, he said to him, "To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you ... See, I place my words in your mouth! Today, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to uproot and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:7-10).

Jeremiah felt that he had not experienced God's assurance to him when he called him to go and prophesy. He continued to see "terror on every side" and hear "denounce him, denounce him" (Jeremiah 20:10). Apparently, Jeremiah was in a hurry for the fulfillment of God's word. In his frustration, Jeremiah accused God of duping him (deceiving him). He wanted to stop prophesying. He said, "I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more." Many of us can identify with Jeremiah; the times we feel that God is silent or absent; the times we do not see his hand at work in what is happening. Such are times we want to give up. St. John of the Cross calls this type of experience "dark night of the soul."

The reflection today reminds us of the poem titled, "Footprint in the Sand" by Mary Stevenson.

One night, I dreamed a dream. As I was walking along the beach with my Lord. Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and one to my Lord. After the last scene of my life flashed before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that at many times along the path of my life, especially at the very lowest and saddest times, there was only one set of footprints. This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it. "Lord, you said once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you the most, you would leave me." He whispered, "My

precious child, I love you and will never leave you. Never, ever, during your trials and testings. When you saw only one set of footprints, It was then that I carried you."

In the gospel, Jesus spoke about his own cross, "[He] must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed ..." Peter wanted Jesus to refuse his cross. "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." Peter was an obstacle to God's plan for Jesus. Jesus rebuked Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me." The encounter between Jesus and Peter reveals to us the pressure we go through, which at times, make us refuse or abandon our crosses. Jesus teaches us not to refuse or abandon our crosses. Jesus says, "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38). The pressures, sometimes, come from our close ones. We need to be watchful.

St. John of the Cross teaches that anyone who perseveres through his/her "dark night of the soul" reaches "illumination." Illumination is also referred to as "sunrise."

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." This is to say that God manifests his power in our crosses. Just as Jesus' Cross ended with his resurrection, we believe that carrying our crosses and following Jesus will bring us to glory.

We conclude with this story:

God, according to his divine plan, gave a man a tall cross to carry and told him, "While on your journey, pray for anything, and I will give you." He set off on his journey. After a few miles, he cried to God, "Lord, it is too heavy, please, cut it down a little." God threw a handsaw to him to cut the cross to the size he wanted. He was delighted and continued his journey. After a few more miles, he cried to God again, "Lord, please cut it down a little more, I will be able to carry it better." God threw a handsaw to him to cut the cross a little more according to his wish. He was glad. After a few more miles, he got to a gully. The easiest way he would have crossed over the gully would have been to place the cross across the gully to become a bridge. Unfortunately, the cross was, now, too short.

May our crosses become our bridges across the gullies in our life journeys. Amen.

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