

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time + 3 Sept 2023 + Jer 20:7-9 + Rom 12:1-2 + Mt 16:21-27

As the Western world becomes more and more secularized, and less people profess Christianity, one of the biggest challenges that the Church faces is how to live as disciples of Christ, when doing so means to 'go against the flow.' That's certainly true, but as we hear in our readings today, this reality is actually not new. In fact, since the very beginning of Christianity, being a true follower of Jesus has never been easy or popular.

We see how difficult it is to follow Jesus in the example of St. Peter in our Gospel today. Now think back to last Sunday's Gospel, where we hear Jesus give to Simon his new name: that is, Rock, or Peter, and then give to Peter the "keys" to the Kingdom of Heaven. This was an incredible honor, and responsibility, and is the basis for our belief in the authority given by Christ to the Pope; that is, the Pope now holds the "keys" to the Kingdom, as the successor of St. Peter. Given this background, today's Gospel, which immediately follows last week's in Matthew's Gospel, comes as quite a shock. Not only does Jesus rebuke Peter, but He even calls him 'satan'! That's not too flattering for the one who is supposed to be the Rock upon whom Jesus will build His Church! So how are we to make sense of this?

Well, even though we believe that with the power of the Keys, the Holy Spirit keeps the Pope from error when he speaks definitively on matters of faith and morals (which, by the way, happens quite rarely), this does not mean the Pope as a human being and as a Christian disciple will never stumble. Peter's problem is that he made a very easy to commit but very serious mistake we have all likely made: he put himself *in front* of the Lord, instead of *following* the Lord, which is the posture of a true disciple. It seems so innocent; he doesn't want Jesus to suffer and die. But the problem is that Peter is pushing his own will—which just happens to be in direct opposition to the will of the Father.

In the Greek, the name "satan" means the 'adversary,' or the 'accuser'. Think back to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Right after He is baptized in the Jordan by John, Jesus is led out into the wilderness to be accused and tempted by satan. In each temptation, satan, the adversary, tries to get Jesus to divert from the Father's will. But Jesus stands firm. He refutes Satan with the power of the Word of God each time He is tempted, and then continues on the path the Father has set for Him, which leads all the way to the Cross.

But we shouldn't think Jesus' defeat of Satan was easy, because the Father's plan for Jesus was definitely not an easy path! As we hear Jesus say in the Gospel today, the plan of God was that His Christ, His 'Anointed One', must *suffer greatly and be killed*. Now, no one in their right mind likes to suffer, and every impulse within a sound mind wants to preserve its life. So this then is why Jesus calls Peter 'satan.' Because like satan himself, Peter is unknowingly tempting the Lord to divert from the path the Father has set for Him, and to seek an easier way forward; a way other than the Cross.

I don't think we can overestimate how difficult this path must have been for Jesus, and so He didn't need his closest ally tempting Him to take the easy way out. Just think of His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night of his betrayal. Matthew records that Jesus *began to be sorrowful and troubled...even unto death* (26:37-39). Unto death! The Greek word here for 'sorrowful' has the sense of intense pain, and is used elsewhere to describe the pain of childbirth! Luke even records that *His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground* (22:44). And so Jesus begs, *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me!* Remember, Jesus is true God *and* true man. His human will dreads the horror that is coming His way. But that doesn't stop Him. He doesn't run. He embraces the Father's will, and so finishes His prayer: *nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*

At this point, Jesus shows us exactly what it looks like to follow St. Paul's teaching in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today; that is, to *not be conformed to this age, but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* Our age tells us that there is no right or wrong—everything is relative. That the only thing in life that matters is to make yourself happy, no matter who you hurt in the process. That there is no one true God, because we are all gods unto ourselves. But Jesus shows us that the Cross is the path to real life—eternal life. This is a counter-cultural path for sure. But in the end we know it is the only way, because no one else has ever risen from the dead, never to die again, but the Lord who first walked the way of the Cross.

And so we are reminded today that all of us are called not to be followers of the ever-changing world, but followers of Christ. And this is not easy! It is quite normal for young people to desperately want to fit in with the popular crowd, and not stick out. But sadly, I think a lot of adults never mature beyond this ultimately unhealthy desire to follow the 'in crowd.' As it was for the Prophet Jeremiah in our 1<sup>st</sup> reading, going against the culture by following Jesus today often means being misunderstood, persecuted, and even hated. It takes extraordinary courage and faith. But Christ shows us how it can and must be done.

But here's the good news: when we step aside and let Jesus lead the way, we also find the freedom of not having to find our sense of self-worth in the opinion of others. We are no longer chained to following the ever-changing fads and values of the culture. When we follow Christ, as hard as it may be, we find ourselves happier, freer, and more at peace.

So finally, we should have no fear in taking up our cross, and following Jesus. He is not a tyrant, lording Himself over us. In fact, He never asks us to do anything that He Himself has not already done. He leads us by loving us even unto death. And by doing so, He has shown us that the reward of carrying our Crosses and following Him is something that the world cannot give. Our reward is nothing less than finding true life with Him for all eternity.