

Homily: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

There's been a lot of talk of 'U-turns' in the news recently – every time someone says something or makes a decision and then quickly changes their mind, a 'U-turn' is declared. Perhaps the media – and maybe St Peter – would use the term of our Lord in the Gospel today. Last week we heard Him hailed by Peter as “the Christ, the Son of the living God”. Jesus told Him that He would be the rock on which the Church would be built, and that the “gates of the underworld can never hold out against it.” It seemed as though everything was about to become clear: the true identity of Jesus as the Son of God was about to be shown to the world, and the power of God was going to reign definitively. And then today, in stark contrast, the Lord tells them that He will suffer grievously and be put to death. It's not surprising that Peter pulls Him aside for a quiet word, to tell Him He's got it all wrong.

Actually, this change of direction is signalled at the beginning of today's Gospel reading. St Matthew tells us that Jesus began to speak about going to Jerusalem. Until now, the Lord has been preaching and working miracles in the towns and villages of Galilee and the surrounding regions in the north of Israel, and although He has faced some opposition, He has always been clearly in control. But once He sets out for Jerusalem, He knows He is going to hand Himself over to be betrayed and crucified. The disciples didn't see it coming, and it must have come as quite a shock.

It's interesting that Peter feels confident to take Jesus to one side. Perhaps after being acclaimed by the Lord for his faith, Peter feels that he can now negotiate with Jesus for God's plan. Perhaps he feels that he has a closer relationship with the Lord than the other disciples do, or that he is now the leader of the disciples and so must take the situation into his own hands. Jesus' response to him must also have come as quite a shock. “Get behind me, Satan”, the Lord says. Satan – the name of the Devil – means, “tempter”. Jesus hears an echo, perhaps, of the Devil's words to Him when He was tempted in the desert: “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread and relieve Your hunger; bow down and worship me, and I will give You all the kingdoms of the world.” In other words, the Devil's attack on Jesus was this: take the easy way out. I can show You an easy path to follow. Peter appears to do the same.

But his way of thinking is not God's way, the Lord says, but man's. We are always looking for the easy way out. We always want to avoid what is hard or painful for us. This is the natural, human, way. Jesus thinks differently. He chooses differently. He calls us to live differently. “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The cross is not immediately attractive to us, because we see that it causes suffering. But Jesus sees it differently. He does not choose the cross because it is suffering. He chooses the cross because it is love. Only for this reason. So the Lord embraces the cross, out of immeasurable love for us, and accepts the suffering that goes with it. There is no genuine love without some suffering, or – at the very least – the willingness to suffer for the one we love.

Love is always triumphant, over suffering, and even over death. So Jesus, love Himself, will be crucified and buried, but will not remain dead. Today – apparently unnoticed by Peter, who hears only what Jesus says about the cross – Jesus speaks of this too. He will “be raised up on the third day,” He predicts. Raised up, because the will of God, the power of God, the love of God is always victorious. Through love He conquers all, and He invites us to share in the task of love, including its suffering, so that we may share in His victory.

When we pray the Rosary, the last decade on which we meditate is the fifth Glorious Mystery – the coronation of Our Lady as Queen of Heaven and the glory of all the saints. It speaks of our final destiny, sharing in the glory of God for all eternity in heaven, reigning with Him in eternal life. But before that, the Rosary invites us to meditate on another coronation. In the third Sorrowful Mystery, we meditate on Jesus receiving His crown of thorns. The glorious crown cannot be won without the crown of sorrow, because this is the proof of His self-giving love. Jesus invites us today to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to love, whatever the cost. He invites us to share His cross, so that we can share His resurrection; to take some small share in His crown of thorns, that we may be crowned with Him in glory.

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