HOMILY FOR 22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Jer. 20:7-9, Rom. 12:1-2, Ps 63, Matt 16:21-27

REFLECTION ON THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

In 1937, A German Lutheran clergy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a Christian classic with the German title Nachfolge (Following) which had English translation of 'The Cost of Discipleship'. He explored the true meaning of following Jesus Christ through an in-depth look at the Sermon on the Mount. He spoke about costly grace which he referred to as a preaching that calls people to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it "costs one his/her life," yet it is grace because it gives a person their only true life. His uncompromising stance against oppression ultimately led to his arrest by the Nazi government and his execution in a concentration camp in April 1945.

Today's Gospel (Matt 16:21-27) echoes a lot of themes to meditate on: Jeremiah 20:7–9 (Jeremiah speaks of the burning fire of God's word despite feeling deceived in his call as a prophet). Psalm 63:(reminds us of the thirst and longing that our heart yearns for the Living God. "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God." Ps. 63:2). In Rom. 12:1–2, St Paul the Apostle urges us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God being inner renewal of our spirit. Then, in Matt.16:21–27-Jesus predicts his passion, crucifixion and death and tells disciples to take up their cross if they are to be His true followers.

We see the paradox of the cross clearly in the Gospel passage: Just moments after Jesus praises Peter, the same Peter rejects the idea of a suffering Messiah. Jesus sharply corrects him, showing that God's ways are not human ways. Saving life means losing it for Christ's sake. This is the fire within prophet Jeremiah who wanted to stop speaking of God's name because of the suffering it caused, but the word became like a burning fire in his heart. True faith cannot be easily contained when tested by the world. Earlier Jeremiah echoed in Jer. 15:16- When your word came to me, I devoured them. Your words were my joy and the happiness of my life, for I have called you Lord God of Host.

To be a living sacrifice, St. Paul invites us to transform our minds and not conform to this world. True following of Jesus as disciples entails total surrender and daily sacrifices.

One obviously feels uneasy listening to Jer. 20:7-9 (R1) (You duped me oh Lord and I allowed myself to be duped). Another version reads- You seduced me oh Lord and I allowed myself to be seduced. The question then is: Can God dupe? Seduce? (2 Tm 2:13; Is 49:14-16, But Zion lamented, The Lord has forgotten me, the Lord has forsaken me. Can a mother forget her infant? Be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even if they do, I will never forget you. For I have engraved your name upon my palms). The prophet Jeremiah is one of the most dramatic exilic prophets. He witnessed the most terrific moments in Israel's history: the last 50years before the collapse of Jerusalem. He experienced the last 5 kings of Judah who were dramatically killed or removed from office. He saw the Temple in Jerusalem demolished, and the dragging of everyone to Babylon in 587 BC.

Jeremiah preached true conversion of heart to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Jer. 7:3-4). Because of this, he was hated, and threatened to be killed. He warned Israel of the impending doom of not turning back to God and their infidelity to God's solemn covenant. On account of his isolation, He ran to the same God that sent him (Jer. 1:4-10) and all of a sudden, it looked like God had disappeared. Then, the prophet felt deceived at both ends. His lamentation can be ours.

Have you ever suddenly begun to feel all alone simply because you insisted on the right way of doing things? Being left out because of your conviction on what constitutes virtue and Christian holiness? Then, you are in Jeremiah's shoes. This is the cost of discipleship. This is dying or being persecuted for the cause of right. Bonhoeffer had earlier on warned Christians of a temptation he called Cheap Grace; a grace seen merely as a doctrine, a principle, or a system. A grace that offers forgiveness without requiring repentance, what he called baptism without church discipline, and comfort without personal sacrifice. It is "grace without discipleship.

Jesus proclaimed blessing on his disciples who are persecuted for the cause of right for such was the lot of the prophets before them (Matt 5:11-12).

Whenever we feel left alone because of goodness or for God's sake or for the cause of righteousness, Jesus invites us to look deeper, to go further, to cast our net of faith into the deeper water (Lk 5:4- duc in altum Jesus commanded Peter) (Lk 5:1-9, esp. vs 5- Lord we have worked hard all night… v.8- Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man). God will always come through for us. Then we realize that we never walk alone!

St Paul invites us like the Jewish Christians in Rome (Rom 12:1-2) to offer our very lives as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. How can we do this: 1) By not modelling our lives according to the pattern of this present days 2) Through inner transformation of our minds and our spirit completely renewed so that we will discern the will of God, what is good, pleasant and perfect.

Then comes the Gospel (Matt 16:21-27). Just after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus clarifies the true meaning of his messianic mission which is to die and rose gain after 3 days (Matt 16:21). Then comes the human drama- Peter took Jesus aside and said no, you will not die. You will not be killed. God forbid that. Right? This will be the way we will think too. Remember, that the Apostles in their mind held unto the hope of Israel in a political messiah who would deliver them from the oppression of the Roman government of the day as a remote motive of following Jesus.

Jesus then rebuked Peter sharply- Get behind me Satan (Matt 16:23). Wa oh! This sounds shocking to us. Peter's human thinking as opposed to his confession based on Divine revelation is now satanic. He manifested obvious lack of full understanding of Jesus's messianic identity and mission as the suffering servant (Is 52:13-53:12).

To be a Satan, is to be an obstacle, an obstruction, or an obex (Latin word for barrier) to the will of God. Our actions to our spouse, children, friends, colleagues can obviously make us satan to them. (1 Pt 5:8-9).

Peter wanted to prevent the very reason why Jesus came to the world- His mission as a saviour by dying (Jn 3:16). In that sense, one would ask, what would have been the need of his coming in the first place. His redemptive mission as designed by the Father in heaven was to save us by his death (Matt 26:39,42- Gethsemane). Venerable Archbishop F.J. Sheen (Life of Christ) said Jesus came to the world not to live but to die!

Because of the seeming ignorance of the disciples; Jesus took time to explain to the twelve that the Son of Man must die in Jerusalem and he also taught them the radical cost of what it means to be his true follower (Matt 16:24-27). To be a true disciple, one must be ready to accept the cost of losing your very life in the course of following Jesus. We must be willing to pay the supreme price. It takes grace, courage, frankness (Mateta and martyria closely related all in NT- Rev 12:11).

Beloved sisters and brothers, Jesus invites us to a deeper relationship with Him in the course of our being his true disciples; but this comes at a great price. Think of the untold sufferings, the discipline of prayers, the charities, the unmerited forgiveness we offer our offenders, the sincere effort to be good. The being called bad names, the rejection we all go through, all for the sake of Jesus. We have an encouragement and a great lesson from the readings today: when we feel all alone in the cause of right; let us run back to God because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses hence the need to persevere in the race before us by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb 12:1-2).

We are invited to resist modelling our lives according to the pattern of the present age. Jesus remains the true measure of humanism (Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, homily (Beginning of conclave mass- *Missa Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*) on April 18, 2005).

Our spiritual warfare is real; yet we must avoid being the satan we are meant to oppose as true disciples. St Paul beautifully puts it in Eph 6:10-13 (Please read and pray with this text at home)- Finally brethren, draw your strength from the Lord and his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the plot of the devil. For indeed our warfare is not with flesh and blood but against principalities, powers, world rulers of this present darkness, and evil spirits in the heavens.

Let us pray for deeper faith so as not to feel abandoned nor deceived by God like Jeremiah. Let us pray for the grace of complete inner renewal and transformation by living radical discipleship in the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for the grace to resist being satan to those around us and also to stand firm against the satans all around us in human forms. Let us relive the real cost of following Jesus by fixing our gaze firmly on Jesus crucified (1 Cor 1:23). He is our wounded Messiah. For: dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our lives; Lord Jesus, come in glory! Amen.