

22nd Sunday (A)

3rd September 2023

‘Embrace the Cross, do not flee it’

Jer 20: *The word of the Lord has meant insult for me*

Ps 62: *for you my soul is thirsting ...*

Rom 12: *do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you.*

Mt 16:21–27: *the way you think is not God’s way, but man’s.*

What are we to make of Our Lord’s outburst to St Peter in the middle of this Gospel account — “*Get behind Me, Satan!*”? It’s an extraordinarily stinging put-down, isn’t it? We only need to think back to the previous verses (which we heard and thought about in last Sunday’s Gospel) to remember how Our Blessed Lord had commended Peter for his great insight in professing boldly that Jesus is “*the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” And Our Lord followed that up with the glorious elevation of St Peter to being “the Rock,” the anchor-point, the mainstay of the Church through the ages. We considered at length last Sunday how this also leads on to our beliefs in the central role of ‘Peter’ in our own day, i.e. the Pope whose ‘Holy See’ of Rome is our point of communion as the universal and apostolic Catholic Church. All this joy and faith rises out of that profession of faith in Jesus by Peter ... and now? ... And now, just a few moments later He is

rebuking Peter in the strongest possible terms: “*Get behind Me, Satan.*” What a contrast! First, “*You are Peter and on this Rock I will build My Church,*” and then, “*Get behind Me, Satan.*” How can we explain this?

Peter was, no doubt, reacting as well anyone might to that first announcement by Jesus of His Passion to come: for Peter to consider Our Lord being betrayed by His own people, and subject to the most horrific tortures and crucifixion, was more than he could contemplate. No wonder, then, that he expresses his intention to dissuade Our Lord from embarking on this path to Jerusalem, the path to suffering. And yet, though well-meant, this earns him no sympathy whatsoever from Jesus. Such thinking, He says, is not from God, but is temptation from the evil one. “Get behind Me,” says Jesus: i.e. ‘get in line,’ ‘fall in behind Me,’ ‘follow, like a disciple should.’ Peter has just previously stated the greatest truth on earth, that *Jesus is the Son of God*, but he still has much to learn about what that entails. And the thing that it does *not* entail is some sort of a free ride, or immunity from suffering. Instead,

says Jesus, it means ‘taking up your cross every day and following Me.’ Every disciple of Jesus, who is truly a disciple, has to be ready to carry the Cross behind Jesus.

The Cross, as we Christians know, is not principally for us an instrument of torture, but it is for Jesus the sign of His love: it is the instrument He used to demonstrate His unconditional love for sinful humanity. It was not something optional, that He could have avoided or passed by if he’d preferred. If we try to imagine Our Lord’s life without that Passion and Cross, it is suddenly emptied of its infinite meaning and salvation for us. Our Lord presses this point home to Peter: the way you think — the way of avoidance of the Cross — is not God’s way, but man’s. We’re not here on earth to feather our nest, or make for ourselves the most comfortable possible living. That is not the Way of the Cross, and it is not the way of Christ or of His disciple. True faith in Jesus demands that we do not spend our life simply avoiding the Cross, but accepting it, even embracing it, as Jesus did. Jesus proved that true love and the Cross go together. There is much to put up with in

life; and the only way not to get despondent about life is to see the challenges and frustrations, even the tragedies, in terms of lessons in love. If life sets us back, or we face a human sorrow, we are not to ask, “how can I flee this sorrow, this Cross ...” but we should be asking, “how can I love even more perfectly in the face of this?” How can my life change so that I embrace the Cross, out of love for Jesus, and learn how to love better and more unconditionally, as He did? This is the antidote to suffering; it is not an anaesthetic simply to dull the pain, (think how Jesus even refused the gall on the Cross which was offered Him as an analgesic). We need to invite Our Lord into the pain, for He is the only One who can lead us in and through that pain to a greater life of love.

The further words of Jesus are also very clear: *“Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it ... What will a man gain if he wins the whole world but ruins his life?”* Let’s not ignore these clear teachings of Jesus. Let’s not say, ‘Oh, that’s for Peter and the others, those strong men of the apostolic age.’ No, these words are for every

disciple, every follower of Jesus: ‘renounce yourself and take up your cross and follow Me.’ We need to examine our lives and see, are we accepting the challenges of life to love ever more perfectly, ever more radically, ever more like Jesus loves? There is no point in life in amassing just comforts and pleasures, or in making life as trouble-free as possible — this is an anodyne life, and ultimately empty. Life is about embracing the Cross, and knowing that Jesus has already carried a far greater Cross, and so can help bear ours if only we will attend His school of love and learn from Him. “*Shoulder My yoke and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,*” He says. Let’s lean on Jesus. What is your Cross at this particular time? Name it. *Jesus, help me carry my Cross and learn from You how this Cross leads me to love better and better those around me.*

Finally, I would like to change key slightly, and reflect on those further words of Jesus, “*What has a man to offer in exchange for his life?*” This connects, for me, with the great demonstration — peaceful and prayerful — which took place in the heart of Westminster yesterday,

namely, the [*March For Life*](#). Thousands of people — mostly younger rather than older, with children too, and babes in arms — processed along Whitehall to Parliament Sq in order to witness to the sanctity of life, the core human right. As Jesus divinely states, the protection and promotion of life has its basis in that realisation, “What has a man to offer in exchange for his life?” Nothing can replace life; nothing can be offered as an alternative to life, for a human life, each and every human life, is a most precious thing. We are not to be — we are not *meant* to be — masters of life and death; life is a gift, and there is simply no other starting-pt to life, scientifically speaking, than the moment of conception, a moment of pro-creation, co-operation, between God and the parents. No human life, born or unborn, can simply be treated as a thing disposable or of no significance, and so we must promote and protect life, especially where it is most threatened which is, bizarrely, in the womb where you would expect life to be safest and most protected. Sadly, not so. The pressures to have an abortion that society, families,

husbands & boyfriends, or the medical profession exert on some women in their pregnancies is often extreme. We have a bizarre double-think at the heart of our society when it comes to the life of the youngest members of our race: we recoil in horror at, for example, the recent details from the trial of the nurse convicted of seven baby killings in her neo-natal unit — and rightly so — but the same horror is not evident at the 215,000 deaths per year of babies just a little bit younger, who happen still to be in the wombs of their mother. Those 215,000 lives per year are also sacred, worthy of being given the chance for life lived, innocent as they are, and not taken from them forcibly by the wish of others, whether mother, father, family or doctor.

Note how it is a very different thing for one to offer one's life on the path of the Cross — sometimes even as a sacrifice like Jesus Himself or the martyrs — to having it forcibly destroyed by someone else. The martyr's sacrifice is not the self-destruction of life, but a "loving to the end." Whereas an innocent life taken violently by another is not an act of love, but an act of hatred or of deadly fear. Now,

even when we are tempted to 'go with the flow' and accept the reasoning of the world around us, the *zeitgeist* of the abortion mentality — that it's an acceptable way to treat the little lives of so-called unwanted pregnancies — then we should let ourselves quickly to be pulled up short by the words of Christ, "*Get behind Me, Satan ... The way you are thinking is not God's way, but man's.*" When we are confronted by this situation — and we will be, perhaps in the life of a family member or dear friend — then we need to witness to life. We need to give love and practical support to any woman tempted to have an abortion, especially as we might be the only voice of true reason around her, the only pro-life voice she will hear. We need to help the women, too, who still suffer from the trauma of abortions to find the peace they need that also comes from Christ, and Catholic retreats such as [Rachel's Vineyard](#) express this love of the Church for those who have suffered. Let us allow this Gospel this morning to help us embrace life, life with its Crosses and trials, knowing that all along that path the Lord of life is with us.