

Losing One's Life to Save It

August 30, 2020, 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Gospel of Matthew 16:21-27

Fr. John

I once came across a poster which said, 'The truth shall set you free, but first it will make you miserable'.

And the picture on the poster depicted that of a rag doll squished halfway through a wringer of one of those old washing machines.

I think that was the experience of the prophet Jeremiah expressed in today's first reading. At first, it was deemed to be a privilege to be called by God to speak His word. But when the consequences of speaking the truth became terrifyingly apparent, it's no wonder that Jeremiah would be asking himself - 'what did I get myself into?'

Peter, who initially thought that Jesus was going to herald in a whole new era of peace and material prosperity for his followers, was shocked to hear his mentor say in no uncertain terms that he himself would go through the wringer of ridicule and subsequent crucifixion.

And further to that, Jesus, in a moment of deep emotion, accuses Peter of speaking the words of Satan, that Jesus knew all too well from his temptations in the desert as he was about to begin his public ministry.

Speaking the truth in God's name is not an immediate cure for human problems and suffering. Like Job in the Old Testament, every human being must pass through difficult times in which we only see doubt and confusion.

In a few days, our schools will be reopening, and while there are plans and strategies in place on how they will operate in the midst of a pandemic, yet no one really knows how it's actually going to work. There are concerns and worries among parents, school staffs and the community at large about safety for the children, their families and friends.

In the midst of all this, a second virus, that of racial tension, has further heightened the divide in our society. The action of professional athletes in boycotting games in order to draw attention to violence perpetrated on visible minorities, has even drawn criticism. One black NBA basketball player was told to shut up about his concerns and 'just keep dribbling.' As if to say that his only purpose in life was to entertain others and not to voice his opinions as a human being.

Our times are truly reflecting a theme that has run through the biblical narrative and our own experience of life itself.

The Franciscan spiritual writer, Fr. Richard Rohr, has referred to this recurring pattern as that of a passage from order to disorder to re-order. Right now, we seem to be in the middle of that dis-order stage - that period when much that has provided us with security and familiarity needs to be re-examined in order to lead us to new ways of thinking and acting.

Like Jeremiah and Peter, none of us find these challenges attractive - but without them we never grow and mature. If we look at our own lives - what have been the occasions and events that have taught us how to be a better person? We don't ordinarily go out to seek pain and suffering - they find us! The significant thing however is - what has our response been?

St. Paul, in our second reading, reminds us, "Do not CONFORM yourselves to this age, but be TRANSFORMED, by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Getting back to that image of the rag doll going through the wringer, perhaps when all is said and done, our present day situation may ultimately have squeezed out some of the complacency and feelings of entitlement from our hearts, to re-order and refill them with gratitude and appreciation for many of God's forgotten blessings.