

THE EMMAUS SERIES

22nd Sunday, Year A

Jeremiah 20: 7-9

Romans 12: 1-2

Matthew 16: 21-27

Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it

In last week's gospel reading, Matthew celebrated Peter's commission as the guardian of unity in the Church. The continuation of that passage, in today's reading, recalls the rebuke Peter received from Jesus after his confession. It was the mission of Jesus, to fulfil all the expectations of the Old Testament. In the questions put to the disciples that led to Peter's confession, Jesus speaks of himself as the 'Son of Man', and he repeats this reference in the concluding words of today's reading. The 'Son of Man' was the triumphant figure of the book of Daniel who was to come on the clouds to establish God's universal reign. Now, in the first of three predictions of his passion, he identifies himself with the 'Servant' of the Isaian writings who, by his sufferings, would lead God's people to the fulfilment of their God-given destiny. These references would have been treasured by Matthew's community, as they recalled their great theme that the life and death of the Saviour took place 'to fulfil the scriptures'. In Peter's condescending response to Jesus' prediction of the outcome of his rejection by the leaders in Jerusalem – 'This must not happen to you' – we glimpse something of the trusting relationship Jesus maintained with his disciples. But the sharp reaction of Jesus makes clear the seriousness of Peter's mistake. There is a great irony in the rebuke of Jesus: the 'rock' is told that he is a 'stumbling block'.

Jesus is forming his disciples, we remember. And now he challenges them to begin to come to terms with the mystery of the Cross – his reconciling and healing of a shattered world. Though Jesus was aware that his conflict with the Jerusalem authorities was a matter of life and death – 'the elders, chief priests and scribes' were the three groups of leaders who made up the Sanhedrin that was to condemn him - his words do not necessarily involve a miraculous foreknowledge of his fate. 'Taking up the cross' was a proverbial way of referring to the bearing of adversity and suffering. Under Roman rule, crucifixion – with its prelude of the criminal's bearing of the heavy crossbeam to the place of execution – was a familiar reality. Those who wish to be his followers, Jesus declares, must be warned that this means a readiness to bear the burden of suffering. The community, from a Jewish background, that Matthew is writing for have been filled with wonder and gratitude, as they recalled the Isaian description of the Suffering Servant: 'He was being wounded for our rebellions ... the punishment reconciling us fell on him, and we have been healed by his bruises' (Is 53). Now they recall the words of Jesus inviting them to enter into this mystery of reconciliation: 'Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it' – a reference to the martyrdom that has already been the fate of some of their fellow Christians; 'Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it'. These words of Jesus imply an astounding claim. 'For my sake', Jesus says. For Old Testament faith, it is only God who deserves to be loved with all one's 'heart, soul and mind' (Deut 16); now Jesus is claiming the same absolute allegiance for himself.

For Jesus, this taking up of the cross is a daily, life-long calling. The other readings of today's liturgy help us to reflect upon what this call involves in practical everyday terms. Jeremiah's heroic faithfulness was to become a source of blessings and encouragement for God's people of every age. Today's passage from Paul to the Romans can serve as a commentary on the call of Jesus. We can offer our faithfulness as a 'living sacrifice', uniting our offering to the Saviour's gift of himself for the sake of the world. It is the mystery of the Eucharist that makes this possible.

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