

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A – 3rd September 2023

***If anyone wants to be a follower of mine,
let them renounce themselves and take up their Cross and follow me.***

How well I remember the first time I preached on this passage – I hadn't been ordained very long. I talked about the importance of carrying our particular cross in life to show our love for God. Afterwards outside church a woman complained about what I had said. She remonstrated with me for being smug, for lecturing people about suffering. "What do you know about suffering?" she said. 'The heaviest cross you've ever had to carry was probably your golf bag.' - I was quite upset by this - especially as I didn't play golf! Yet I learned two valuable lessons through that encounter – many people naturally assume that all priests play golf – but, more importantly, that I should never try and give the impression that as a priest I have all the answers.

In the first twelve months as a priest everything seems so easy, so new and fresh – but then I began to feel like the prophet Jeremiah today "I am a daily laughing stock, everybody's butt." I have come to have a deeper sense of my own weakness and frailty. When I look back over my time as a priest and see the situations I didn't handle very well, the countless number of times when I felt out of my depth, when I felt like a square peg in a round hole, it would be tempting to stand here and say: "if only I had been a better Priest, if only I had used, rather than wasted, the opportunities that have come my way ...if only I had been more decisive, more caring, more patient...and so on. "But that misses the point – and the point is this: our failures, our woundedness, our frailty are the very reason why God loves us and continues to love us. He's not interested in our successes or our failures. He loves us as we are, not as we would like to be.

If we have any doubt about whether or not God loves us, we should look at the Cross – for the cross shows us how much God loves us – the Cross reminds us that the God we worship is a God who doesn't force himself into our lives but who comes gently alongside and shares them: The God who comes to us in our

temptation and weakness and frailty and shares our pain. The God who loved the world so much he gave his only son to die on the Cross that we might have life.

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let them take up their cross and follow me.

Thirty years on from that little incident I spoke of at the beginning, I realise now that it is important to take up our particular Cross not to show our love for Him, but as a response to his love for us. The emphasis is not on what we do but on what God does. We take up our Cross because God loves us... The Cross does not necessarily mean our arthritis, or our indigestion, or the experience of getting older - at least not in the first place. These are things that come to us in spite of ourselves. The 'cross' for us means the suffering that comes our way because of the choices we make in life, the commitments we make not for ourselves, but for others.

There is no bypass round Calvary. You can't take the Cross out of Christianity any more than you can take the pain out of living. Crosses are burdens we carry on our shoulders (golf bags excluded), not just pretty ornaments we wear around our necks.

Sacrifice not an easy road - but it is in this way that our finest self takes shape. And paradoxically this is also the road to happiness. Sacrifice is not about destroying something - it's about renouncing something for something far greater and more life-giving.

The call to carry the cross is a call to love. And to love means to give life. What may seem to us to be an utterly hopeless situation may in fact offer a doorway to a newer and fuller life. Have known that time after time in my own life - relationships, seemingly hopeless situations, my weakness or failure has been a 'happy fault' through which God is able to find a way into my life and show me that I am not alone. I need to depend on Him.

'Get behind me Satan – 'Christ strongly rebuked Peter when he tried to dissuade him from heading towards Jerusalem, where his cross and crucifixion awaited him. 'The way you think is not God's way but man's.' St. Paul has the same message for us today: 'do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind – this is the only way to discover the will of God, and know what is good, what it is that God wants.'

How do we discover the will of God? We can be very impatient. God's way is not our way. Following Christ needs to be done in small steps. God is far more patient and loving with us than we are patient and loving to ourselves.

We discover his will for us by trying to be faithful to our particular calling, and to those to whom we are committed. We discover his will for us by inviting him more deeply into our lives and allowing ourselves to be loved by him – not because we know we are worthy, but because we know we are not.

The way we deal with suffering and pain in our lives as Christians can be a great witness in our world of today, a world where there is so much aggression and so little patience, so little compassion.

Our parish should be a community of love – never underestimate the importance of that. If we truly 'serve one another in love,' then the way we treat one another, and the way we live out our faith in the wider world has immense potential for change, so long as we are faithful to the message of the Cross - the message which is summed up so powerfully in the verse of a modern hymn:

*In blazing light your Cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you.*