

August 30, 2020 | 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

[Jer 20:7-9](#)

[PS 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9](#)

[Rom 12:1-2](#)

[Matt 16:21-27](#)

By John R. Donahue, SJ

From the complaint of Jeremiah that God duped him, through the call of Jesus to take up his cross and follow, to the present day, the vocation of the prophet to be a messenger and witness to God's word is fraught with suffering and rejection. Yet prophets cannot abandon their prophetic mission, which is a fire burning in their hearts and imprisoned in their bones. This burning fire will only bring more hatred and suffering.

Peter, in last Sunday's Gospel, was called to be the foundational rock of Jesus' Church and to hold the key to the kingdom of heaven. Yet when faced with the shocking reality of the great suffering and brutal death of Jesus, he rebukes him, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." Jesus unmasks Peter's rebuke by calling him Satan and a stumbling block who does not think as God does but as human beings do, "for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus then proclaims the demanding message of how God thinks.

Those who think the things of God are summoned to deny themselves and to be ready to follow Jesus by taking up their cross, "for whoever wishes to save his [or her] life, will lose it, but whoever loses his [or her] life for my sake will find it." Taking up the cross and denying one's self captures the paradoxical ethics of Matthew's Gospel. The "life" promised to disciples is the true life embodied and taught by Jesus:

the rejection of power when offered all the kingdoms of the world;

a paradoxical identification with the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers and those who seek justice;

forgiveness of enemies,

quiet and constant prayer to a loving Father,

and inner peace amid threats and suffering.

"Denying one's self" is more profound than daily acts of mortification. The self that is lost is the autonomous individual so dear to American consciousness. It means displacing one's self from the center of our consciousness while looking to the true self embodied by Jesus' teaching. At his general audience on August 12th of this year, Pope Francis warned of this attitude, "The pandemic has made us more aware of the spread within our societies of a false way of thinking, one that

rejects human dignity and relationships, views persons as consumer goods, and creates a 'throw away 'culture'(cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53).

Though Jesus calls all who want to follow him to take up their cross, neither Peter who denies him at his trial, nor any disciples take up the cross to follow him to his death. As Jesus moves toward his death soldiers must draft a foreign bystander, Simon of Cyrene, to do what the disciples were unwilling to do. A reluctant bystander Mark called the father of Alexander and Rufus carries the cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21; Matt 27:32). Yet that becomes a moment of grace since Rufus and his mother are perhaps among the early Christian community in Rome (Rom 16:13). Simon, who appears in the traditional Stations of the Cross, can be an icon of those who accompany those burdened under the weight of today's pandemic.

Given the scourge of COVID-19, Jesus' harsh demands scarcely resonate as good news today. The thought of the suffering and death of Jesus overwhelmed Peter, who proclaimed Jesus as Messiah. Like Peter, it is easy for us to think only as humans do but not as God thinks. It's easy to forget that Jesus was be raised up on the third day and will come with his angels in his Father's glory. The great paradox of Christian faith unfolds here. Suffering and death are not the final word. Following Jesus leads to victory over death. From those "martyrs of faith" in early Christianity to those martyrs of faith for justice and peace of our time Like St. Oscar Romero, and Sr. Dorothy Stang, people have lost their lives for the sake of Jesus and left a legacy of hope.

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