

22nd Sunday Ordinary Time 3 September 2017

“The Cost (and benefits) of Discipleship”

Readings: Jer 20:7-9, Ps 63, Rom 12:1-2, Matt 16:21-27

1. Summary: Jesus calls us to happiness and fulfillment. This leads us as his disciples to loving, mature and competent relationships. Surprisingly this develops through the Gospel call to “self-denial”, suffering, and obedience! This always brings happiness and success in this life for it represents Jesus’s way for us (He is the way, the truth, and the life). Sometimes (usually) it brings suffering and conflict because of the opposition of the world to the will of God, but that, in turn, brings maturity and salvation.

2. Commentary on the Readings:

3. In the first reading: Jeremiah lived from about 650 B.C. to about 580 B.C. Most of his work was done in Judah’s capital, Jerusalem. He was sent by God “to tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). He tried to keep a people who lived in a politically charged atmosphere, full of backstabbing, **faithful to God**. Jeremiah was regarded as a traitor by his own people because as God’s mouthpiece, he had to foretell the dire results that would follow from their plan of revolt against the mighty power of Babylon. The result? His life became very difficult. He became depressed and complained bitterly to God. The English word, *jeremiad*, means an elaborate and prolonged lamentation or tale of woe. Today’s passage in the first reading is the purest of jeremiads. In it, Jeremiah accuses Yahweh of tricking him. This offers us a powerful description of someone suffering for having obeyed God. Sometimes faithfulness to the call of God leads to conflict and suffering in this life.

4. In the second reading, Paul advises the Roman Christians that they must live their Christian lives in such a way that they differ both from the Jews and from the pagans. St. Paul calls them to adopt an attitude of **sacrifice** in their worship of God. In order to do this, they must explicitly reject the behavior of the world around them. “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice” to God. “This is your spiritual (logiken) worship. “Do not be conformed to this age (world) 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.”

5. In the Gospel reading Jesus teaches his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed and **on the third day be raised**. After rebuking Peter, Jesus lays down the terms of discipleship: “Whoever wishes to come after me must *deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me*. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake **will find it...**” This is exactly what both Jeremiah and St. Paul experienced.

6. What do these three conditions really mean?

7. Self-denial means denying ourselves, getting rid of selfish thoughts, desires, habits and tendencies from ourselves and letting God completely dominate us. It also means being cleansed of all evil habits, enthroning God in our hearts and sharing that God with others. To gain this as a virtue, we must practice it.

8. Carrying the cross always means pain and suffering. But our sufferings become the cross of Jesus only when we suffer by serving others selflessly or when we give ourselves – our health, wealth, time, and talents – to others until it hurts, or when we offer up our suffering with the Spirit purifying us through our personal sufferings or penitential practices.

9. Following Jesus means obeying Jesus, not seeking our own personal freedom or advantage. Hence, we should live our lives according to the Word of God by obeying what is commanded by Jesus.

Does this life-style lead to happiness and success or to boredom and disappointment? One contemporary educational psychologist thinks it is the former.

10. The work of Dr. Daniel Goleman, recorded in his ground-breaking book, *Emotional Intelligence*, gives us fascinating instruction. Let me quote:

“Emotional intelligence is a master aptitude, a capacity that profoundly affects all other abilities, either facilitating or interfering with them.”

“The marshmallow test at Stanford University preschool: As a four-year old... This is a microcosm of the eternal battle between impulse and restraint, id and ego, desire and self-control, gratification and delay.”

“There is perhaps no psychological skill more fundamental than resisting impulse (delaying gratification). It is the root of all emotional self-control, since all emotions, by their very nature, lead to one or another impulse to act.

These children were tracked down about twelve years later. The emotional and social difference between the grab-the-marshmallow preschoolers and their gratification-delaying peers was dramatic.

Those who had resisted temptation at four were now, as adolescents, more socially competent, personally effective, self-assertive, and better able to cope with the frustrations of life. They were less likely to go to pieces, freeze, or regress under stress, or become rattled and disorganized when pressured; they embraced challenges and pursued them instead of giving up even in the face of difficulties; they were self-reliant and confident, trustworthy and dependable, and they took initiative and plunged into projects. And, more than a decade later, they were still able to delay gratification in pursuit of their goals.

Those who grabbed the marshmallows immediately, however, “tended to have fewer of these qualities, and shared instead a relatively more troubled psychological portrait (immediate gratification). In adolescence they were more likely to be seen as shying away from social contacts, to be stubborn and indecisive; to be easily upset by frustrations; to think of themselves as “bad” or unworthy; to regress or become immobilized by stress; to be mistrustful and resentful about not “getting enough”; to be prone to jealousy and envy; to overreact to irritations with a sharp temper, so provoking arguments and fights. And, after all those years, they still were unable to put off gratification.”

Even more surprising..., those who had waited patiently at four were far superior as *students* to those who had acted on whim. They were more academically competent, better able to put their ideas into words, to use and respond to reason, to concentrate, to make plans and follow through on them, and more eager to learn. Most astonishingly, they had dramatically higher scores on their SAT tests. Those who waited to obtain their two marshmallows had 210 points higher average in their scores.

11. Our point: The way of the Lord Jesus, self-denial, godly suffering and obedience to the standards of God, yields true maturity and is the basis for success and happiness. Here we offer an invitation to grow in this discipleship and everything it offers.

Being a Catholic following Jesus can be a very good thing.

12. Application:

1. What have I gained from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from this Mass that can help me to become the better-version-of-myself that God wants?
2. What are areas in my life where I am too much self-indulgent instead of self-disciplined?
3. What changes do I want to make in my personal and spiritual life this year?