



22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A – September 3, 2017

In order to be a disciple of Jesus we must pick up our cross every day and follow him. What does that mean? It means that suffering is inevitable and unavoidable. Some people will laugh at us for what we believe and how we live just like they did with Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:7-9). In their own way, they will mock us and ridicule us for following our Lord. Follow him anyway.

Is it possible that life on earth is one of the many dimensions of purgation in a cosmos of parallel universes created by God, where people can learn to love like Jesus before they reach that state of being called heaven? We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

In the second reading (Romans 12:1-2) St. Paul challenges us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice for the work of the Lord. If we want to follow Jesus, we must make sacrifices and that's not easy. Follow him anyway. It's the only way to learn how to love as he does.

The gospel also reminds us as that we must take up our cross every day. Jesus is not talking about the crosses we create for ourselves through pride and avarice, envy and laziness, or any one of the capital sins. He's talking about the cross involved in learning to love others as he loves us. He says, "Deny yourself..." (Matthew 16:24). That is very difficult to do, but it can be done.

Along with St. Peter, we can find ourselves asking a rather selfish question, "What's in it for me?" Jesus anticipates the question in the Gospel (Matthew 16:21-27). He says, "Whoever wishes to save his life - will lose it. Whoever loses his life will save it." Like Jesus, we are on earth to serve, not to be served. That is our purpose here on earth – to help each other. Jesus continues. He says, "What profit is there for a man who gains the whole world and loses his soul?"

So what is in it for us if we follow Jesus? What's in it for us is "*Happiness*" here on earth and forever in heaven. A Harvard psychiatrist said on one occasion, "If you put together in the same room, the best philosopher, the best theologian, the best psychologist, the best psychiatrist, the best anthropologist, and the best historian, and challenge them to come up with a plan of life that will achieve happiness on earth, they won't be able to come up with anything better than the "Sermon on the Mount". That sermon begins, as you know, with the eight beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12).

The Greek word "*makarios*" is translated "*blessed*" in most English translations but it also means "*happy*". How can suffering and happiness exist at the same time in the same person? The "happiness" referred to in the beatitudes is not a passing feeling dependent on someone or something. Like heaven, it is a state of being. It is available to rich and poor alike. Riches do not guarantee it and poverty does not exclude it.



When Jesus says, "Pick up your cross and follow me..." he doesn't add, "... *and then you will be unhappy*". Here on earth, suffering does not exclude happiness and happiness does not exclude suffering. Jesus says, "Follow me...". Therein lies the key to understanding how a person can suffer and be happy at the same time. Trust our Lord. Human suffering comes in many different forms but none of them can kill happiness. The only thing that can kill the happiness that Jesus speaks of is self-centered selfishness. There's a lot of that going around in our country today. It doesn't have to be that way. We get to choose.