

Homily: 24th Sunday: 2021: Cycle B: Is 50: 5-9; Ps. 116; James 2: 14-18; Mk. 8:27-35

“Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his Cross, and follow Me”

- 1. The themes of today’s readings seem more appropriate for Lent, but really are valid for every day of the year.** In the **first** reading we hear a passage from the Suffering Servant narrative of Isaiah, which points to the Passion of Jesus. The **second** reading from James should stir up thoughts of repentance in our hearts and minds since we always need to improve in integrating our faith and our daily works. And finally Jesus tells us in the **Gospel** that unless we pick up our Cross and deny ourselves we will not have life in Him.
- 2. When we look at Jesus on the Cross what do we think?** I mentioned a time or two before, but it is worth repeating. A great spiritual writer of the last century named Fr. Edward Leen wrote in a spiritually profound book called *In the Likeness of Christ* that there are four main reactions to the image of Jesus on the Cross in the human mind and heart. The **first** is one of incomprehension: *that this is horrible how this man is suffering and I need to look away from this reality as it makes no sense.* The **second** is to say to oneself, if one knows a little of the back story: *this is a just, innocent, man and I wonder why Jesus is suffering such agony - is there a reason, a purpose to such pain?* Both of those are simply natural reactions without seeing Jesus with the eyes of faith. The **third** reaction is: *this is the Son of God and He is suffering for our sins.* Finally the **fourth** reaction is: *this is the Son of God suffering for my sins, as well as for those of the world, and I should be up there with Him!* We as believers should have the fourth reaction. **It’s not enough that Jesus died for us, we must be willing to personally share in the mystery of His passion, to die to ourselves and to pick up our Cross daily and follow Him.** The grace is there to do so - if we open our hearts to it.
- 3. The Cross** in our lives is all *the trials, tribulations and sufferings* we experience on a daily basis as a result of being a work in progress in terms of holiness, and also living in a redeemed yet still sinful world. There is a great battle between good and evil going on in our world and in each of our hearts; even though in the

end good will definitively triumph over evil in the Second Coming of Jesus in glory. Our late great Holy Father St. Pope John Paul II wrote a beautiful apostolic letter in 1984 called *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. In it he points us to the reality that, **in Christ, human suffering now has become redemptive, if we consciously unite our sufferings with Him.** However, that is a real difficulty for us human beings to grasp because we naturally don't like to suffer and our tendency is to complain about suffering, be it physical, mental or spiritual, as well as the fact that we don't see the redemptive aspects of suffering right away in this earthly life. This leads to **an important question:** *should we try to alleviate suffering?* Yes, we should do what we can on the natural and supernatural level to alleviate our suffering; after all, God gave us doctors and psychologists and priests to help us in different ways – see Covid treatments. But sometimes no amount of help takes away the suffering (*see the lady with the hemorrhages in the Gospel of Luke chap 8:43-48*). **Then what?** The old saying is if you complain about your sufferings you lose - to some degree at least - the graces and merits for yourself and others which those sufferings can bring, not in themselves, but united to Christ and His Cross. Archbishop Fulton Sheen said once, *“There is nothing more tragic than wasted suffering.”* **What did he mean by that?** Suffering united with Christ is a precious spiritual gift that the Lord uses to purify our souls of sin and selfishness, and we can also offer our sufferings for others' spiritual conversion and in a spirit of reparation for our sins and those of the whole world; (this is the whole message of our Lady at Fatima – are we trying daily to do that)? Witness the difference between the **good thief** and the **bad thief** on the Cross. One turned to Jesus in his suffering and was saved. The other turned away from Jesus in his suffering, turned in on himself and was seemingly lost. The good thief did his Purgatory on the Cross uniting his sufferings with Jesus and going in essence to Confession to Jesus admitting all his sins – telling the other bad thief - we are on the Cross for our crimes – this man is innocent –, and Jesus then said to him, *“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”* May we hear those same words when we take our last breathe here on earth, as the culmination of uniting our sufferings with Jesus in love throughout our life. God bless you.