Homily – 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

These are among the most challenging words Jesus ever spoke to His disciples.

We like to hear Jesus say, **"Come to me," "I love you," "I forgive you," and "I will be with you."** And all of those things are true. But today Jesus gives us another part of the Gospel. He tells us that following Him also means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him. And honestly, that is not always what we want to hear.

We live in a world that constantly tells us: **"Take care of yourself. Do what makes you happy. Avoid anything difficult. Get what you want. You deserve to be comfortable."**

But Jesus says: **"Deny yourself." "Take up your cross." "Follow me."**

Why would Jesus ask this of us? Because He knows something that the world often forgets: true happiness does not come from avoiding sacrifice. True happiness comes from giving ourselves in love.

Look at today's Gospel. Jesus has just asked His disciples who people say He is. Peter gives the correct answer: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**

Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter still has a lot to learn about what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

Jesus begins to explain that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be rejected, and be killed—and then be raised on the third day.

Peter doesn't like this at all. He takes Jesus aside and says, essentially, **"Lord, this cannot happen to you."** Peter wants Jesus to be the Messiah, but he wants a Messiah without suffering. And Jesus responds very strongly: **"Get behind me, Satan!"**

That sounds harsh. But Jesus is not rejecting Peter. He is correcting him. Peter is thinking as the world thinks. He is looking for glory without sacrifice, victory without suffering, resurrection without the cross. And Jesus tells him: **"You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."**

That is an important warning for us. Because sometimes we can do exactly the same thing. We want Christianity to make our lives easier. We want God to remove our problems. We want Him to fix our relationships, finances, families, worries, and struggles. And sometimes we pray: **"Lord, take this cross away."** But Jesus sometimes answers our prayer differently.

He doesn't always take the cross away. Sometimes He says: **"I will help you carry it."** There is a very important difference. Christianity does not promise us a life without crosses. Christianity promises us that we will never have to carry our crosses alone. Jesus Himself carried the cross.

He knows what suffering feels like. He knows what rejection feels like. He knows what it means to be misunderstood. He knows what it means to

be betrayed by a friend. He knows what it means to experience physical suffering and humiliation.

So, when Jesus tells us to take up our cross, He is not asking us to do something He Himself was unwilling to do. He goes first. And He says, **"Follow me."**

Sometimes when we hear the word **"cross,"** we think only about something dramatic. But most of our crosses are much more ordinary. For some people, the cross is caring for an aging parent. For others, it is raising children and making sacrifices for their family. For some, it is a difficult marriage or a strained relationship that requires patience and forgiveness. For someone else, it may be loneliness. It might be an illness. It might be financial difficulties. It might be losing someone we love. It might be trying to overcome a temptation that keeps coming back. It might be forgiving someone who has deeply hurt us. It might be remaining faithful to our Catholic faith when our friends or even members of our own family don't understand it. Sometimes our cross is simply doing what is right when it is difficult.

And there are also the small sacrifices that nobody sees. Getting up early to pray. Coming to Mass when we are tired. Making time for confession. Choosing forgiveness instead of revenge. Putting someone else's needs before our own. These things may seem small, but they are opportunities to love as Christ loves.

Saint Paul says in the second reading: **“Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”**

The world tells us: **“Look out for yourself.”** Jesus tells us: **“Give yourself.”** The world tells us: **“Protect yourself from sacrifice.”** Jesus tells us: **“Take up your cross.”** The world tells us: **“Your happiness is the most important thing.”** Jesus tells us: **“Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”**

This is one of the great paradoxes of Christianity. If we spend our entire life trying to make ourselves happy, comfortable, successful, and important, we can become miserable. But when we begin to give ourselves away in love—to God, to our family, to our parish, to those who need us—we discover a deeper happiness.

Why? Because we were created for love. We were not created simply to consume, to accumulate, or to make our lives comfortable. We were created to give ourselves. That is exactly what Jesus did on the cross.

In the first reading, Jeremiah says**: “You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped.”**

Jeremiah is frustrated. God called him to be a prophet, but his mission has not been easy. He has experienced rejection and suffering. He wants to give up. And yet, he discovers that he cannot simply walk away from God. He says: **“If I say, ‘I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more,’ then it becomes like fire burning in my heart.”**

Jeremiah discovers that God's call is stronger than his desire to escape suffering.

That is what happens when we truly encounter Christ. Following Jesus does not mean that we never become tired. It doesn't mean that we never become frustrated. It doesn't mean that we never ask, **"Lord, why is this happening?"**

Even Jesus Himself prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, **"Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me."** But He continued: **"Not my will but yours be done."** That is the heart of Christian discipleship.

There is one more important thing to remember. Jesus does not simply say, **"Take up your cross."** He also says that He will be raised on the third day. The cross always has resurrection on the other side.

That doesn't mean every problem will be solved in the way we want. It doesn't mean every suffering will disappear. But it means that suffering does not have the final word. Death does not have the final word. Failure does not have the final word. Sin does not have the final word. Jesus does. And because Christ is risen, we can carry our crosses with hope. Perhaps each of us should ask ourselves: What is the sacrifice that Jesus is asking me to make? Is there someone I need to forgive? Is there a relationship that needs healing? Is there something God has been asking me to do that I keep avoiding?

Maybe our prayer today should not simply be: **“Lord, take my cross away.”** Maybe it should be: **“Lord, give me the strength to carry it with you.”**

Because Jesus never asks us to carry the cross by ourselves. He walks beside us. He gives us His grace. He gives us the Eucharist. He gives us the Sacrament of Reconciliation when we fall. And He reminds us that the cross is not the destination. The resurrection is.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us not be afraid of the crosses that come into our lives. Let us not run from every sacrifice. Let us not measure our faith by how comfortable our lives are.

Instead, let us follow Jesus faithfully. Take up the cross. Carry it with love. And trust that, just as the cross led Jesus to the resurrection, our faithfulness to Him will ultimately lead us to the fullness of life. **Amen.**