

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
3rd September - 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Jeremiah 20:7-9. 2nd: Romans 12:1-2. **Gospel:** Matthew 16:21-27.

When Florence Nightingale decided to devote her life to helping wounded soldiers her family and friends told her to reconsider and think of herself.

The Flemish priest Fr. Damien, who went and spent his life caring for the lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai, was given the same advice. Having cared for them he is remembered as one day saying ‘we lepers’ as he had then caught it.

Jeremiah, our 1st reading, had the hardest vocation of all the prophets. His message, summed up in words ‘violence and ruin’ against Jerusalem, aroused not only hatred but also frank disbelief and mockery.

His sensitive spirit, which longed for peace and companionship, was deeply wounded. In a mood of bitterness he accused God of having forced him into an intolerable situation: yet when he tried to rid himself of his vocation he found it utterly impossible: the word of the Lord was burning within him.

Although God never overrides human free will, there are times when he puts the maximum pressure on a chosen servant to enable them to continue the calling in spite of obstacles.

This picked up in the Psalm and by St Paul in the 2nd reading. His keynote is the willing and complete offering of ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. As the ways of the world are basically self-centred, the believer must resist the temptation to compromise, and so be receptive to learning God’s will.

Jesus was put under the same sort of pressure, in Mark 3: 21: ‘when his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind.’ They wanted Jesus to think of himself.

His temptations in the desert show how he had already been tempted by Satan to think only of himself. In today’s gospel we learn the fundamental law which shaped Christ’s ministry, and therefore shapes the vocation of all his true followers.

In a world where people have become estranged from God and chosen self-centredness, the challenge of sheer goodness provokes the sharpest antagonism. Jesus saw that he would have to suffer and die if he were to be true to his commission.

Peter’s shocked reaction is understandable: it was contrary both to natural feeling and Jewish hopes to accept the thought that their Messiah and leader must suffer.

Jesus’ reply indicates the seriousness of the situation. Peter is not Satan, but he is letting Satan work through him to lure Jesus into the path that always looks so sensible in our eyes- the path of self-preservation.

It follows inevitably that his servants must be prepared to make the same decision and to lose anything, even life itself, in remaining loyal to their master. “For anyone who wants so save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s executioners came to take him from his cell to be hanged, Bonhoeffer turned to his fellow prisoners saying: “This is the end, and for me the beginning of my life.” He understood those who think that it is useless to give one’s life away for the life of the world- which is what Bonhoeffer did – simply do not understand.

In T.S. Eliot’s play *The Cocktail Party*, the friends and acquaintances of Celia Coplestone are very sad when they hear how she has been tortured and murdered during a revolt, while nursing dying people in a far-off country. The guests at the party consider Celia’s death to be a useless waste.

Her physician, Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly, tells them that they feel guilty because they have not made the sacrifice that Celia did. Refusing to acknowledge their guilt, they convince themselves that Celia's death was pointless: however, Sir Henry adds; "It was a triumph."

There are depths in the human heart which are not normally reached except through suffering.

One key message of the New Testament is that the way to salvation is the way of the cross.

One must die to self in order to live unto God.

As I ever remind you the Cross is the I crossed out.

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