

Homily: 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday: 2015: 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”

The themes of today’s readings seem more appropriate for Lent. 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. But the reality is these themes are appropriate for any time of the year, for the message of the Cross is the message of salvation.

1. **When we look at Jesus on the Cross what do we think?** I mentioned this once before in a homily, 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 he 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.
2. **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 still a 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. But sometimes no amount of help takes away the suffering. **Then what?** The old saying is if you complain about your sufferings you lose, to some degree at least, the graces for yourself and others which those sufferings can bring, not in themselves, but united to Christ and His Cross. The Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen said once, "*There is nothing more tragic than wasted suffering.*" **What does 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. 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 (see Fr. Reginald Garrigou La-Grange, *The 3 Ages of the Interior Life: Vol 2, p. 374*).

3. **Even the image of the Cross has meaning for us Christians because Jesus dying on the Cross is the ultimate act of self-giving love, which saved the human race because the man dying on the Cross is actually God's eternal Son!** We are called to share in and grow daily in our love for the Cross. Satan of course does not want us to do that, but to turn away from the Cross - see Jesus's rebuke of Peter today in the Gospel. **But turning from the Cross truly is the**

**path to destruction over time.** The path to eternal life is in embracing our Cross daily. And God gives us the one we can handle in His providential love for each of us (see the story of St. Catherine of Siena in the room with all the different crosses). We pick up our Cross by embracing our daily sufferings and duties with Christ, with love, and by letting our faith flow into good works of charity. As St. James reminds us today, *“faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* We need to be about a life of doing and living good deeds in relation to God and others. **What is the true practical test of whether we are growing in holiness, growing in God’s likeness?** The spiritual fruit of our life: in our prayers, in our daily life are we growing in generosity and charity, in love toward God and our neighbor, in our thoughts, words and actions? A spiritual caution: remember this is a reality primarily in our wills, and only secondarily in our feelings! We choose to live a life of charity even when we don’t feel like it (see Jesus in his agony in the Garden the night of Holy Thursday). If we simply go on our feelings in our spiritual life, we will not make much progress at all, and in fact will probably backslide more and more into selfishness and complaining about our lot in life, instead of being primarily concerned about God and the well being of others. We are also called not to be complacent in our piety: to say our prayers, but not reach out and help others - that is not acceptable to the Lord. We are called to use our time, talent and treasure for the glory of God and the good of others. It’s in giving that we receive. And for some of us, especially for the sick and the homebound, the greatest spiritual gift we can give to God and the Church is our prayers and our sufferings offered up daily to Jesus, in union with our Lady, for the intentions of His sacred Heart which desires to draw all people to salvation. May we never think of our life as a waste – our life is never a waste as long as we daily embrace our unique Cross in generosity. God over time will transform us in His love and goodness, fill us with His peace that the world cannot take away, and one day we will be with Him forever in His Kingdom, where there will be no more sorrow or pain or tears. *“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 and that of the Gospel will save it.”* God bless you.