

## THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS: 22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY A

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Sunday after Sunday we are either here or there, listening to the Word of God in the first major part of the Mass. Nearly always the message from God that we hear gives us some comfort, consolation, hope, reassurance, and even joy. But sometimes God challenges us with words of tough love, and we hear something quite demanding. Without his *'amazing grace'* we may find that Word of God just a bit too difficult to swallow or a bridge too far to cross. That's the kind of message from Jesus told through Matthew today.

Jesus says to his friends and followers, and therefore to you and me: *'If you want to become my followers, deny yourselves, and take up your cross and follow me'* (Mt 16:24). The word *'cross'* Jesus is talking about has been softened. For Jesus it doesn't mean, at least not in the first place, your arthritis e.g., your indigestion, that difficult relationship. We don't choose those pains; they choose us. In the NT the *'cross'* means that suffering that comes into our lives because of the choices we make for the kingdom, which is to say the choices we make for the reign and rule of God over everyone and everything. This to say that the *'cross'* means the deliberate but difficult choices we make for integrity and truth, justice and love, peace and joy – the values of God for the coming of God's kingdom – on earth as in heaven.

An illustration! Nelson Mandela, the Father of modern South Africa, spent twenty-seven years in prison. But for a couple of years before that he was on the run. This is what he has written of those earlier years:

*It wasn't easy for me to separate myself from my wife and children, to say goodbye to the good old days when, at the end of a strenuous day at the office, I could look forward to joining my family at the dinner-table, and instead to take up the life of a man hunted continuously by the police, separated from those who are closest to me, facing continuously the hazards of detection and of arrest. This was a life infinitely more difficult than serving a prison sentence.*

(from his *Long Walk to Freedom*).

His motivation to make such great sacrifices was his love for his country and its well-being. The *'cross'* he carried was his love for his people.

There's a religion of devotion and there's a religion of commitment. A religion of devotion tends to be a religion of comfort. It's often centred on self, on what I get out of it rather than one centred on others, on what I do for them. A religion of commitment is a religion of challenge and risk expressed in unselfish and generous service of others and their needs. There

can be no doubt that it's a religion of commitment and dedication that Jesus is asking of you and me.

This does not mean, though, that suffering is something Christians should actively seek for its own sake. Jesus himself did not seek to suffer. Gethsemane makes that clear. But suffering is the price we pay, as Jesus did again and again, for acting justly, loving tenderly, and walking humbly with our God.

It helps to remember that following Jesus doesn't have to be in great leaps and bounds but in small steps. But what does it mean in practice to follow him? It means being faithful to one's way of life. It means concern for others in every way - the caring gesture, the kind word, speaking truth to power. These all count, when love turns the cross from a stumbling block, an obstacle, into a stepping-stone and even an experience of fulfilment and joy.

The road to Jerusalem brought Jesus to Calvary. But it did not end there. It led to Easter. Along our Way of the Cross Jesus supports us to the very end, and shares his Easter victory with us.

There's a saying: *'No cross, no crown!'* For you personally, how comforting and reassuring is that? Do you really believe it?

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