

Palm Sunday (C)
(Isaiah 50:4-7 / Luke 22:14-23:56)
14.04.2019

In today's first reading we heard Isaiah give voice to the Messiah's words. As Christians we recognise the Messiah, whom the prophet foretold, to be Christ our Lord. The short extract from chapter 50 of Isaiah's prophecy has the Messiah speak of his determination to follow through on God's call upon his life; his willingness to do whatever the Lord may ask of him, without consideration of the cost involved and in spite of the hardships that may be entailed. This is something we recognise Christ to have done. Jesus accomplished the Father's will in all things; for Him that was to prove to be, quite literally, a crucifying experience

Following the example of the Messiah in Isaiah 50 and of Christ, as He is presented to us in Luke's Passion Narrative, you and I are invited to make no resistance to God's call upon our lives. We are invited *not to turn away* when the Lord asks something of us, even when what He requires of us is something we find daunting and would much rather avoid. The call addressed to us is to trust in the Lord, whatever demands He makes upon us, confident in His promise to be there for us as our helper. Faithful to His word, *the One who calls us will not fail us*; He will see us through. He will comfort and strengthen us; He will supply for our every need and make provision for us when what is asked of us is beyond our own strength alone. Isaiah's words encourage us: *The Lord comes to my help*. And for the prophet to go on to say: *Because the Lord comes to my help, I will not be dismayed*. Yes, brothers and sisters, the Messiah of Isaiah 50, whom we recognise to prefigure Jesus, is a model for each one of us.

As we read the Passion Narrative this morning, we are invited to look to Christ and from our contemplation of His attitude and actions to draw forth inspiration for our lives. The call addressed to us is to apply Jesus' way of being in His Sacred Passion to the concrete reality of our lives. This is especially true for us at those moments in the unfolding of our vocational stories when we are looking for a sense of direction in a difficult discernment and need exceptional courage to follow through on what is revealed to be God's will for us.

This morning I would like to concentrate on one particular passage in the Luke's account of the Sacred Passion: that moment when Jesus sought to accord His will to the Father will for His life. This is something we all have to do at times. In our effort to accord our will to God's will, Christ's prayer in Gethsemane remains a model for us. While we hear the Son of God pray: *Father, if it is possible, let this cup of horror be taken away from me*, Jesus nonetheless commits Himself to follow through on the Father's will for His life, however hard and challenging God's will may prove to be. We are told how Jesus went on to say: *But, if it happens that this bitter cup cannot pass me by, then not my will, but Your will be done... Not my will, but Your will be done*. What we are shown in this passage of the story is that it was precisely in and through prayer that Jesus persevered. We are given to see it was in and through communion with the Father in prayer that Jesus managed to maintain a thoroughly humble attitude of heart and trusting faith when He found Himself faced with the awesome task God set before Him. Christ understood that He what was required of Him was nothing less than total submission to God's sovereign will for His life – a submission to be lived in complete confidence. There is a lesson here for us.

Difficulties and challenges are facts of life for everyone. They simply cannot be avoided. As we face up to them, what makes all the difference is our attitude of mind and heart. Both Paul and James insist upon this in their writings.

Lines from chapter 5 of Paul's Letter to the Romans and chapter 1 of the Letter of James come to mind.

In the Romans text I refer to, we are encouraged to *persevere as we endure suffering*, doing so *in sure and certain hope*, convinced that no matter what hardships we are led to traverse, in the end, our *hope will not be disappointed*.

In what could be considered as something of a parallel to Romans 5, in the first chapter of his epistle, James makes the point that *when the way before us is rough, occasion is given to us to grow, on condition that we don't pull back*. James goes on to counsel us: *Don't try to squirm out of your problems*. He then goes on to declare: *If you want to know what God wants you to do, ask Him, and He will gladly tell you, for He is always ready to give a bountiful supply of wisdom to all who ask Him*.

Again and again, the Sacred Scriptures assure us that *with God nothing is impossible*. The call for us at all times – not least in times of trouble, trial and tribulation – is to be *with God*. When and where we fail and falter in life, we are not *with the Lord*. It is precisely when we turn away from the Lord and forget His abiding presence by our side that we stumble and fall. What I am saying here is brought home to us in a little passage in Luke's Passion Narrative concerning Simon Peter. I think of these words which Jesus is depicted to have spoken to Peter: *After you have fallen, when you have repented and turned to me again, you will rise up renewed to strengthen and build up the faith of your brothers*. In that little verse, when He says to the apostle *when you turn to me again*, Jesus attributes Peter's weakness and denial to the apostle's having turned away from Him. What is particularly interesting to note is the Master's promise to Peter: *I have prayed for you*. In Luke's Passion Narrative – as indeed throughout his whole gospel account – not only do we see Jesus praying for Himself, but also, and so very often, praying for others. We are reminded thus that Jesus prays for us. Christ prays for you and for me at this very moment, whatever may be going on in our lives. As we struggle to enter into Christ's prayer of pleading with the Father, expressed in the words, *Not my will, but Your will be done*, it is particularly important for us to remember that Christ intercedes with and for us. He pleads with the Father that our wills, like His own, may be accorded to the God's desire for our lives. The certitude that we have Jesus' prayer support should strengthen us in our struggles; it should encourage us to face up to whatever challenges come our way. Things can be asked of us in the Lord's service which may well and truly daunt us. Understandably so. Demands can be made upon us that may well and truly stretch us – sometimes, we may fear, bringing us to breaking point. At such moments of strain, how important for us to recall that Christ's intercession is there to sustain us, helping to make us ready to better serve those for whom we are called to give our lives in the respective ministries the Lord has confided to each one of us.

In our reflection on Luke's Passion narrative we have paid attention to Jesus' words to Peter, concentrating on the Master's prayer for the apostle and Christ's words of encouragement to him. For me, there can be no doubt that what Peter went on to express in later years, especially in the opening chapter of his First Letter, was born of the apostle's experience of the Lord's proximity to him in his trials and tribulations; the Lord's closeness at those times when Peter encountered difficulties and challenges of all sorts. Here is what the apostle has to say in the Letter I refer to – at a point where he has evidently been led through the crucible of suffering. I read the apostle's words as an encouragement to those of us who may be traversing a time of passion and suffering in our lives at present; a period of uncertainty and fear, right now. I render Peter's words in contemporary paraphrase in a bid to bring out their pertinence for us: *God is keeping watch over you... in His mighty power He will make sure that you get through life's challenges... He will lead you safely because you are trusting Him... Your trials are only a test to your faith... Pure gold put in the fire comes out 'proved' gold, genuine faith put through suffering comes out 'proved' genuine... The prophets, who told us it was coming, asked a lot of questions about the gift of life God was preparing for us*.

The Messiah's Spirit let them in on some of it – that the Messiah would experience suffering, followed by glory... They were finally told that the things we speak of here would not occur during their lifetime, but long years later, during yours... And so I encourage you to obey God because you are His children... Your trust can be in God... Your faith and hope can be in Him...

As we seek to be accorded to God's will in our lives, striving to be open to whatever the Lord may ask of us in the service of His people, may we draw enlightenment from what Peter shares with us in those lines from his First Letter.

In Luke's Passion Narrative heard this morning, it is Jesus Himself who is heard to declare that Peter, after he had strayed and fallen, would be brought back and raised up to be confided mission to strengthen and build up the faith of his brothers and sisters – that's to say, our faith!

And so, it seems to me that we are invited to take the apostle's words to heart this morning and to find in them an echo of God's own encouragement to us. At this time in our lives, may Peter's testimony help us renew our trust in God. May it inspire us to have faith and place all our hope in the Lord, who, as the Messianic Servant of Isaiah's prophecy declared: *comes to our help, leaving us no cause to be dismayed.*

Amen!