

## **TWENT- SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR.**

**The cost of discipleship: Romans 12:1-2 & Matthew 16:21-28**

Today's readings discuss something rather uncomfortable: The necessity of sacrifice, of taking up our crosses to follow Christ, even when following Christ comes at great expense. It's the Cost of discipleship.

Perhaps we can begin to understand what Saint Paul is saying – after all, we probably make various sacrifices for those we love. We also make sacrifices during Lent and Advent; we may fast for a particular intention and we try to live our lives in a way pleasing to God by treating our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit.

But if we're honest with ourselves, we've also probably felt like Jeremiah at times. "You duped me, Lord!" he cries. "God, I followed your will and Church teaching and yet here I am, suffering! Being persecuted! That's not fair," we might say. The Book of Ruth was read during the week, and I wanted to relate it to what we see going around in our society today and the second reading of this twenty-second Sunday in ordinary time. And of course the Gospel for this Sunday.

Ruth is basically a work of fiction, a short—only three pages—historical romance novel sort of! Like all other books of the old Testament, the book of Ruth was basically pondering some of life's big questions. The Joseph story deals with the unexpected reversal of fortune; Job, with the perennial question that still breaks backs: how can a good God permit evil or not do anything about it; Jonah, like Ruth, with how to treat outsiders.

These stories in those books above weren't history. They were creative folktales of the Middle East that the Hebrews took over to try to figure out how to deal with these thorny matters. They didn't always come up with an answer, and they frequently changed their minds, but through their stories they struggled with big issues. That's why the Bible is more of a book of questions than of answers. The book of Ruth is a classic woman's tale. A Hebrew couple, Naomi and Elimelech, migrate to the foreign land of Moab to avoid a famine back home. There they have two sons who marry local Moabite women. Elimelech dies and then, ten years later, the two sons die, leaving Naomi in that society defenseless without a man.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, decides stay put in Moab, but the other, Ruth, decides to go with her mother-in-law, who wants to return to her people at Bethlehem. Naomi protests but Ruth responds with those famous words, "Where you go I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, your God will be my God."

As a clergyman who has witnessed many weddings I am always amused when the bride and groom select those words as their reading. They like the "Where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people" sentiment, taking it to mean that they will be at one with their spouse, but never realizing that these words were spoken, not to a spouse, but to a mother-in-law! I can't image any groom publicly declaring to cherish and follow his mother-in-law!

Anyway, like a good story, things happen fast. Ruth and Naomi, poor and outcast, go back to the Bethlehem area. Since it was a humane custom when harvesting to let any corn or grain that fell off the wagon be left for poor people to gather, Ruth and Naomi find themselves following the farm wagons to get something to eat.

In true soap opera style the owner, a fellow named Boaz, notices gorgeous Ruth and orders his men to let more than the usual amount of corn fall off the wagon. Old Naomi, like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, quickly sizes up the situation, smells a possible rich husband in the making, and advises Ruth in the art of seduction. Eventually it all works out, and Boaz and Ruth marry and live happily ever after. A made-for-television story.

**But that's the surface story. The real issue the story subversively deals with is how one treats outsiders, especially one's enemies.** At different times the Hebrews had different answers. Mostly the answer was hate: destroy your enemy. After the exile, for example, the leaders Ezra and Nehemiah, in a desperate need to regroup and emphasize a defeated people's identity as God's Chosen Ones, cruelly forced the men to divorce the foreign wives they loved. "Stick with your own" was the motto.

By the time of Jesus, society was still an "us against them" affair. But Jesus the Jew starts to tap the old underground tradition. Could it be because the son of Ruth, the foreigner, became the grandfather of King David, from whom Jesus was descended? In other words, outsiders are in his genes. Anyway, Jesus begins his subversion. He openly eats with outcasts and sinners, for which he was roundly criticized. He dares to touch and cure the segregated, untouchable leper.

He cures the son of the hated Roman occupier, the centurion; he spoke of his Father letting it rain on the just and unjust, said love of God and love of neighbor were two sides of the same coin, and, when asked "who is my neighbor," responded with a story about a good Samaritan rather than a good Jew. On Calvary he prays for his Roman executioners. Here at last was something definitive for his followers, a new teaching. His disciples were to treat all equally. His disciple Paul, who urged us in today's reading, "Do not conform yourselves to this age," summed up the new rule by declaring, **"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."**

That dealt a blow to categorizing a whole people. It dealt a blow to prejudice, segregation, ethnic cleansing, racism, and any other external line of measurement as a warrant for unequal treatment. Or, at least, it was supposed to. The fact is, as we know, many of the people who carry Jesus' name have had a hard time following his words and example.

**Let me share three true memories here below:**

In 1942, by order of President Franklin Roosevelt, nearly 120,000 people were forced into internment camps in rural Wyoming. These families lived in a single room in a barracks with no privacy. They earned 12 dollars a month repairing shoes or raising pigs. A barbed-wire fence circled the camp. Guards were everywhere. Tower searchlights constantly swept the camp. The charge against these men, women, and children? They were of Japanese descent, and Pearl Harbor had just happened. Never mind that two-thirds of them were American citizens. Using false intelligence, such as that the Japanese were communicating with enemy submarines, the

government trampled their civil rights and imprisoned them because of their race. After the war, each survivor got 25 dollars and a train ticket. Most had no homes by this time. There was no job waiting. They faced discrimination, even had trouble finding a grocery store that would take their money. Later President Reagan finally apologized on behalf of the nation for humiliating a people because of their nationality, saying that this is not what America is all about: to judge a whole people for the sins of a few.

The second story happened some twenty-five years later. On March 16, 1968, American soldiers, in an event that became known as the My Lai Massacre, killed some three to five hundred unarmed citizens, mostly children and women, of South Vietnam. When it finally came to light, some twenty-six soldiers were eventually charged with horrendous crime, but only Lt. William Calley, a platoon leader, was convicted. As an aside, three U.S. soldiers who tried to halt the massacre and protect the wounded were later denounced by U.S. congressmen. These soldiers received hate mail, threats, and found mutilated animals on their doorsteps. It would take thirty years before they were honored for their efforts.

When it all came to light, having learned the lesson with the Japanese, the U.S. Government bent over backwards to assure the Vietnamese people that all Americans were not like that. Those soldiers represented an aberration. Most were dedicated and compassionate. In other words, don't blame a whole people for the crimes and sins of the few.

Finally, an Auschwitz survivor remembers: "I was just a boy when the Nazis put me, along with my family into a cattle car in a city in France and started us on the long journey to Auschwitz. We had no water and we had no food, but each night the train would stop and sit still for hours. Time and time again, after hours had passed, there would be German people who would sneak out of the forest, come up to the sides of the cattle cars and push in between the slats of the car small containers of water and bits of food. Their generosity kept me alive. What they did was done at a great risk. So—whenever I hear someone with a German accent, I say to myself, 'Could that be the child or grandchild of one of those who dared to help me in my time of need?' Then I smile at them."

Others who hear a German accent say all Germans are barbarians, just as all Irish are drunkards, all Italians are Mafia, all Orientals are evil, all Muslims are terrorists, all whites are trash, all blacks are lazy, all soldiers are cruel, all Americans are imperialists, and on and on. You name the label.

**Jesus encourages us to make judgments about wicked and conniving individuals, but forbids us to brand a whole people as evil, inferior, or tainted because of the shameful deeds of a few. Where such labeling and prejudice exist, we are called to be like the soldiers who blew the whistle at My Lai— and we'll probably get the same treatment, but that's the cost of discipleship.**

Our crosses are heavy. Sometimes unbearably so. But Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. He gives us his body and blood as food for the journey, as we bear our sufferings and bring our imperfections to Calvary. As we carry our crosses, we can rejoice in a way that the early disciples could not: We know the story doesn't end on Calvary.

**Amen!**