

Church of the Divine Love

Homily Sunday August 30, 2020

Exodus 3: 1-15; Psalm 26: 1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16: 21-28

Discipleship and the cross.

God's people sometimes suffer. It is hard to understand why God lets people suffer even when they are trying to do what is right. The people of Israel suffered as slaves in Egypt even before they had done anything to deserve it. God does not always keep us from suffering, but he does give us help in the midst of suffering. God suffers when we suffer. God feels our pain and experiences our grief. God said to Moses, I have seen the troubles my people have suffered in Egypt. I have heard their cries. I know their pain. God was suffering with the people of Israel and could not stand the pain any longer. That is why he sent Moses to Egypt to lead them out of bondage. It is comforting to know that we have a sympathetic God who understands our hurts and shares our pain. God proved that he is God. The Egyptians were very religious people, but they worshiped false gods. They worshiped the Nile River and the sun. They worshiped animals as representatives of their gods. They even worshiped the Pharaoh.

The ten disasters were aimed at the false gods of Egypt. When the Nile turned to blood, when the sun stopped shining, when the animals died, and when the firstborn son of Pharaoh was killed, God showed that the gods of Egypt were powerless. God wants people to worship him, not the things he made. The Israelites were saved through the blood of a lamb. On the night of the tenth plague in Egypt, each Israelite family killed a lamb and smeared its blood on the door frames of their house. At midnight, God passed over the land and spared the homes that had a lamb's blood on the door. The Passover lamb that saved the Israelites from death was a type or symbol of the coming Lamb of God. More than 1,200 years after the Israelites killed their Passover lambs in Egypt, someone would be killed as our Passover Lamb in Jerusalem. He would shed his blood for us. He would die that we might live.

The prophets said that Jesus would rise from death. David wrote about Jesus' resurrection when he said, "You (God) will not let the body of your Holy One rot in the grave." Isaiah, also, wrote about Jesus' resurrection when he said, "The Servant gave himself to be the One to die. But he will have new life." Jesus predicted that he would rise from death. In Jerusalem Jesus said, "I will give my life so that I can take it back again." At Caesarea Philippi Jesus told his apostles that he would be killed, but he would be raised from death on the third day. At least two times, Jesus predicted his own resurrection. Jesus really was raised from death. When we read in the Bible that Jesus was raised from death, we are not reading a fable. We are reading history. Jesus was actually, physically, and literally raised from death. The guarded tomb was really empty. Mary Magdalene, the other women, the two followers on the road to Emmaus, Peter, James, the other apostles, and more than 500 followers in Galilee all saw Jesus after he was raised from death. Some people saw him many times. They went everywhere telling people, "We have seen Jesus. We have touched him with our hands. We have heard his teaching with our own ears."

We, too, will rise from death. Jesus said, "A time is coming when all people who are dead and, in their graves, will hear the voice of the Son of Man. Then they will come out of their graves. The people who

did good in life will rise and have life forever. But those who did evil will rise to be judged guilty. "Jesus will come again in glory. All his angels will come with him. He will sit on his great throne as King. All the people of the world will be gathered before him. Then he will separate people into two groups as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will say to those on his right, "Come and get the kingdom that God has promised you." He will say to those on his left, "Go away from me. Go into the fire that burns forever. That fire was prepared for the devil and his angels." Then the bad people will go away to be punished forever. But the good people will have life forever.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus explained to his followers that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, and be killed. Then, on the third day, he would be raised to life. Peter took Jesus aside and said, God save you from those sufferings, Lord! That will never happen to you. Jesus turned to Peter and said, Get away from me Satan! You are not helping me! You don't care about the same things God does. You care only about things that people think are important. Peter was looking at things from a human point of view, but Jesus wanted him to look at things from God's point of view. Then, Jesus said to his followers, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must stop thinking about yourself and what you want. You must be willing to carry the cross that is given to you for following me" (Matthew 16:24). Jesus concluded, "Any of you who try to save the life you have will lose it. But you who give up your life for me will find true life" (Matthew 16:25). Jesus was being honest with his followers. Following him would not be easy. They would have to deny themselves and be willing to give up everything for him. They might even have to die with him on a cross. But in giving up their lives for him, they would save their lives forever. If we want to follow Jesus, we must humble ourselves and stop thinking about ourselves and what we want. We must be willing to follow Christ anywhere, even to death. This teaching goes against human nature. We don't like it, but self-denial is the only road to spiritual growth.

We can never really understand what it means to believe in, confess, or follow Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," until we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The cross is not usually a part of our program for happiness. It sure was not a part of Peter's program. The cross stands as a sign of contradiction to our programs for happiness. God does not give us crosses to bear. The burdens, difficulties, losses, and frustrations we encounter every day are not our cross. They are just the circumstances of life. Taking up our cross is not the means by which we are made good, acceptable, or lovable in God's eyes. They are not God's punishment for our sins or his test of our faithfulness. The cross does not justify our sufferings in this world, it transforms them.

When Jesus said that those who want to save their lives will lose them and vice versa, he was right. Our world is full of examples of people who have sold their souls by using sex, drugs, money, careers, possessions or alcohol to find happiness in life, only to be disappointed. Whatever a person is or becomes in his outward life, the quality of his or her soul will be the deciding factor in how he or she lives and how others experience him or her. The death of singer Amy Winehouse is a good example. She had everything the world could offer-a good career, money and fame-but her drunken binges and tragic death showed the true emptiness of her life. With God, though, there is another way. Through his life, suffering, death on the cross and resurrection, Jesus saves us by showing us the way to a life of God's forgiveness, love and grace-given with no conditions and no strings attached. God provides for us the chance to live a life with a full range of the possibilities potentially present everywhere. We take up the cross of Jesus any time we suffer in some way for identifying with Him and His cause. "Cross bearing" does not always include affliction or persecution in general. It may mean denying what we deeply

desire in order to do the will of God. When we obey Him, we position ourselves for great blessing. We can take up our crosses and know that the Lord will bear them with us.

Today we are reminded that our confession of faith has consequences and shows itself not only in public worship, but through our words and deeds in our daily lives. Peter's story reminds us that it is not one incident alone that makes a life. Though we fall again and again, it is the getting up that marks the true child of God. So, we offer our lives in surrender to Christ's purpose. The waters of our baptism still bubble up inside us and enable us to confess with Peter that Jesus is the Son of God. They also constantly renew in us the willing spirit that says, "Yes" to our own taking up the cross to follow Christ. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us.

Amen.