

Following Jesus...

TRINITY 12 – YEAR A – (MATTHEW 16. 21-28) – 3RD SEPTEMBER 2017 – SPRINGLINE PARISH

Jesus in today's gospel: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* (Matthew 16. 24)

These are strong, uncompromising words coming from Jesus. These are words that you won't hear from a politically correct society or even a politically correct Church. *"If anyone want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

In this one sentence, Jesus clearly gives us the meaning of a 'truly Christian' life as different from a 'merely worldly life'. He begins with a big 'if', that is 'if you want to follow Christ - means there is a choice, it depends on you to choose a life with Christ or a life without Christ. *If you decide to follow Christ there are three central, clear proposals from the part of Jesus. They are first, "deny yourselves", second, "take up your cross" and third, "follow me."*

1. "Deny yourselves."

What does it mean to "deny" ourselves? (Pause....) We are daily bombarded by other messages: "Satisfy yourselves"; "enjoy yourselves"; "avoid every pain".... Instant gratification, success, profit, pleasure, rather than pain, prestige and celebrity status, desire to be known, taken notice of and the rest. This is the world's way.

Jesus, instead, says, "deny yourselves". What he means to say is not that Christian life is a "kill joy", that you have to go about with a glum, gloomy, sad face. What Jesus wants to tell us when he says, "deny yourselves" is, simply, *don't make yourself the 'idol' of your life.* Celebrity status is not what fulfils your soul! In short, don't worship yourself as the world wants us to, as Jesus himself says: *"The Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."* So, **denying yourself means making God the centre of your life.** It doesn't mean to hate yourself!

2. "Take up your cross."

The second proposal of Jesus if you wish to follow Jesus is, **"take up your cross"**. In the time of Jesus, the cross was not a punk symbol, a sign of protest or provocation or a fashion symbol as it is today. The 'cross' was an utterly distasteful sign and a symbol of punishment and shame. One wonders, how many of those who wear the cross today know about the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross when he saved us and gave us new life. The cross is the most powerful symbol for us Christians and it is time we salvage the saving aspect of this potent symbol.

What does it mean to take up your cross? (Pause....)

What about the 'cross' in our lives? Which are 'our' crosses? All of us have our own crosses, big or small, but we have them – the burden of our temptations, failures, sins, addictive habits...the cross of our weak, human frailties; the cross of sickness, alcohol, drug, a broken relationship, death, disability, age, loneliness, despair ...for some, it is an unexpected or long drawn lack of physical or emotional well being. For others, it is a problematic child in the family, a rebellious son or daughter or a child who has a disability...we all have our crosses....for some it is the place of work that is terribly unhealthy....an authoritarian and unjust employer....For others, the cross may come in the form of a chronic illness or addiction to something...for someone else it is a marriage that went wrong...or the death of a loved one that makes us cry to heaven with that heart-wrenching 'why'.....for others it is the pain of 'waiting' for someone or something to happen, a new job, owning a new house, paying off a mortgage or loan...we can go on and on...the list will never end... we have to carry our crosses no matter what they are.... But how do we do that? Is it possible? The answer is given in the third proposal of Jesus as we shall presently see.

3. "Follow me."

The third proposal that Jesus makes us is: **Follow me!** And finally Jesus tells us today, not just to deny ourselves, not just to carry our crosses, but above all to "follow" him. We don't need to be Christians if we only 'deny' ourselves, if we only 'carry our crosses'. *We could be Buddhists or Hindus or anyone else. Christianity, instead, is utterly about a Person - Jesus Christ. It is all about following him by believing in him and committing your life to him. Following Jesus is a personal decision to say "YES" to his invitation.* As Karl Rahner, a great Christian disciple and teacher writes: *"The discovery of the right way to follow Christ is always the result of personal decision. And the personal responsibility for this decision which cannot be pushed off on a moral book or a spiritual director, is an essential element in our imitation of Christ. Therefore, we must risk the loneliness of this kind of existential decision."*

In the 26 session diocesan course "Following Jesus" the absolute focus for every session is "Jesus". **Jesus is the "key" to understand the Bible; Jesus is the "key" to understand the world; Jesus is the "key" to understand life; Jesus is the "key" to understand love.**

To conclude, **following Jesus is "The Answer" for every human question and situation.** This doesn't mean you will have a bed of roses but it does mean a *daily commitment with a clear focus in your life that leads you to discovering "hope" in spite of all, hope that is in Jesus Christ* and as Paul writes discovering hope in "the power of the resurrection" in the midst of your life's darkness and crosses.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
(Matthew 16.24) Let pray in silence and see how and whether we really follow Jesus.

[ST Mattapally]