

Theme of the Week - Renounce ourselves

Just a few verses before our Gospel of the Week, Jesus praised Peter for being the only one who understood who he really was: the Messiah, the saviour sent by God and long expected by Israel. All of a sudden, though, praise turns into rebuke, and a stern one too, as Jesus calls Peter - the first Pope! - Satan. What happened? Israel was expecting the Anointed Messiah, but they had in mind a victorious ruler who would defeat all of Israel's enemies (The Romans, the pagan populations around Jerusalem etc.) and re-establish the Kingdom of David through violence. Peter too was of this advice, and when Jesus started talking about going up to Jerusalem to offer his life, to suffer violence rather than using it, to be insulted and die the death of a criminal, Peter objects: ***We don't want that kind of saviour! The Messiah should be feared, not killed! We want a powerful saviour, not a loser.*** Peter (like us) does not understand and therefore cannot accept the fact that **ONLY LOVE** can bring healing, and that only the **OFFERING OF ONE'S LIFE FOR OTHERS** can bring about the desired Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus calls him SATAN. The word *satàn* in Hebrew means *accuser*, an enemy who stands in the way and who accuses you in front of a judge. Peter, through his opposition to the Cross, stands in the way of Christ who is performing the work assigned to Him by God the Father, the **RECONCILIATION OF HUMANITY THROUGH HIS SACRIFICE**. We too can be *satans* every time we try to find a shortcut from the Cross, that is the offering of our own life for the good of others. The world is full of people who acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, that he was a wise and loving person, that his teaching is relevant even today, but they **WOULD NOT FOLLOW HIM ON THE CROSS**, they would not give up the things they are attached to, the lifestyles they have chosen, their priorities, their habitual sins etc. **This is the essence of the satanic, avoidance of the CROSS.**

After this stern rebuke to Peter, Jesus turns to all the disciples and explains what it means to follow Him in very simple words: *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.* Firstly, we must **RENOUNCE OURSELVES**, but what does this mean? After the fall, our relationship with God was marred by sin, and from that moment human beings have lived in fear. Unfortunately, rather than by turning again to God, people try to overcome this fear by putting themselves at the centre of their lives and accumulate as much power, money, influence, pleasure as they can in a vain attempt to be fulfilled, and often end up using things and even other people for their satisfaction. Jesus' proposal goes in the opposite direction: **LEAVE EVERYTHING AND YOU WILL GAIN EVERYTHING, offer your life as a sacrifice to God and your brethren, and you will gain the very eternal life of God.**

Secondly, Jesus invites His followers to **TAKE UP THEIR CROSS**. Now, this sentence has been misinterpreted for many centuries, and reduced to an invitation to accept with patience the sufferings that come our way (physical, mental and spiritual). This is not what Jesus meant: during the dreadful procedure of the Roman crucifixion, the man sentenced to death was savagely flogged in the Praetorium, and then loaded with the horizontal arm of the cross (the *patibulum*), and forced to walk all the way to the place of execution. During this journey he was exposed to the cruel abuse of the crowds, who would spit at him, mock, insult, strike him with rods, throw stones at him, and try to make him stumble under the weight of the heavy cross (this is why Jesus fell three times). **So, when Jesus invites us to carry our cross, he means TO HAVE THE COURAGE TO FACE MOCKING, INSULTS, RIDICULE and PERSECUTION for His name.** We may be tempted to think that those days are over, the days of persecutions and martyrs, but in reality, our Western society has created its own new dogmas, and is becoming increasingly intolerant of Christianity and the Church, to the point that publicly professing to be a Christian and standing for the teaching of Scripture and the Church attracts much abuse. **THIS IS A PERFECT TIME TO BE A CHRISTIAN and test the mettle of our faith in Jesus.**

At the beginning of this new academic year at St Joseph, take some time to meditate on this Gospel, on what Jesus asks of you. Is your faith only a veneer, or is it at the heart of your life and choices? Are you only willing to accept the fake 'Cool Jesus' and shy away from the Cross, or are you willing to follow Him up to calvary to make of our life a gift to God and your brothers and sisters?



From the Gospel of Matthew (16:21-27)

Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day. Then, taking him aside, Peter started to remonstrate with him. 'Heaven preserve you, Lord;' he said 'this must not happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's way but man's.'

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. What, then, will a man gain if he wins the whole world and ruins his life? Or what has a man to offer in exchange for his life?

'For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and, when he does, he will reward each one according to his behaviour.'

Day 1

Just a few verses before our Gospel passage Jesus had praised Peter calling him a 'rock' of faith; now he rebukes him sternly calling him Satan.

- What has Peter done to deserve this treatment?

Day 2

The first thing Jesus asks to those who want to be his followers is to **RENOUNCE THEMSELVES**.

- What do you think this means?
- How can we do it in the simple thing of our daily lives?

Prayer for the Week

Lord Jesus, sometimes out of fear we try to run away from the cross and find shortcuts. At the beginning of this new academic year, make us understand that it is only through sacrifice that we can achieve great things, and that it is only in each other's service that we can find true happiness. In your name we pray. Amen.

Saint of the Week

St Rosa of Viterbo (1233-1251)



While still very young, Rosa began a life of penance in her parents' house. She was as generous to the poor as she was strict with herself. At the age of 10, she became a Secular Franciscan and soon began preaching in the streets about sin and the sufferings of Jesus. Viterbo, her native city, was then in revolt against the pope. When Rose took the pope's side against the emperor, she and her family were exiled from the city. When the pope's side won in Viterbo, Rose was allowed to return. Rose was canonized in 1457. She did not influence popes and kings, did not multiply bread for the hungry, and never established the religious order of her dreams. But she made a place in her life for God's grace, and like Saint Francis before her, saw death as the gateway to new life. She was:

COMPASSIONATE & LOVING

Day 3

The second invitation of Jesus to his potential disciples is to **take up their cross**.

- What does the cross represent?
- Why are we invited to pick it up?