

Fr. Romeo Evangelista's Homily  
September 8, 2019  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

One of the most inspiring books written in the past 50 years is that of American psychiatrist Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled. It is a book which brilliantly integrates psychology and spirituality. And that book begins with the following sentence: "Life is difficult".

When Jesus says in today's gospel reading, that in order to become his disciples, we must take up our cross and follow him, what is he saying exactly? That Christians are the only ones with a cross? That could hardly be his meaning. True, on some occasions Christians are called to suffer for the sole reason that they are Christians – in times of persecution, for example. But, on the other hand, Christians may well suffer less all in all than, say, Atheists or Buddhists or Hindus, because their religion brings so much more meaning and consolation to their lives. So, everything considered, it is impossible to say who suffers most, the disciple of Jesus or the non-disciple. However, one thing seems certain, and this is, that all humans suffer, all have crosses to bear. If that is the case, then what could distinguish the disciples of Jesus from the rest?

Let us go back to the words of Jesus for our answer to that question. He says, "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple". These words suggest that the difference between the disciples of Jesus and the rest of humans is that the disciples take up their cross, whereas the non-disciples, who also have a cross as all humans do, do not take it up, but just drag it along, as it were. In other words, all humans encounter suffering, bear a heavy burden, but their reaction to suffering differs. Some people embrace their suffering courageously, whereas the others attempt to avoid it at all costs – which results in greater pain for them and an inability to grow both mentally and spiritually. In other words, some people confront and resolve their problems (the disciples of Jesus) and suffer through the changes that entails, whereas others vainly refuse to do so and, as a consequence, suffer more in the long run.

As we know, the testimony of spiritual masters is unanimous. They all tell us that our response to suffering is what matters. A positive, creative reaction develops the person, whereas a negative one will stunt him or her. In short, a person can become better or bitter in the midst of suffering, depending on that person's attitude. The courageous taking up of one's cross (instead of a cowardly dragging along) is what makes all the difference in the world.

Among many testimonies on this theme, let us conclude with that of American Jesuit Bill Schock, who died in the Philippines a few years ago after a long and painful illness. He, who was familiar with suffering, wrote these words:

"If you do not experience more peace in your life, it is not because of what is happening to you. It all depends on how you choose to look at things. If you go through the day with blaming, angry and critical thoughts, you will feel miserable because you are making yourself miserable. If you go through the same day with excusing, forgiving and loving thoughts, you will feel more peace. You can't always choose what is happening to you, but you can choose the way you think about what is happening to you. 'Change your thoughts and you will change your world'. Most often you can't change "The World", what is happening to you, but you can change "Your World" the way you think about and, therefore, react to "The World".

Always having Faith, Hope and Love in our mind and heart is what gives us all the courage to carry our cross daily and become a true disciple of our Lord.