

Twenty-fourth Sunday Per Annum (B)
September 13, 2015.

Whoever wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mk. 8:34).

Our Altar Crucifix today has been replaced by a reliquary which contains a tiny sliver of the Cross of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This precious relic of the True Cross was given to me by a priest many years ago. I have used it often to bless the sick and even once in a minor exorcism. People have received the grace of healing with its blessing. It is by the Cross of Christ alone that we are healed and saved and so *we should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered* (Entrance Antiphon, Exaltation of the Holy Cross, *The Roman Missal*). Our Lord makes the embrace of the Cross the condition for authentic discipleship: *Whoever wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*. St. Paul the Apostle goes beyond the embrace of the Cross. He says, *but far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world* (Gal. 6:14). One can only glory in the Cross, that is, rejoice in the Cross if we have come to know and to believe that Christ Our Lord is *the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Cor. 1:24). In one of his earliest epistles St. Paul explains: *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified... for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men* (1. Cor. 1: 21-25).

The world has not changed since the time of the Apostles because human nature is the same; and so we also preach Christ crucified. *The word of the cross...is the power of God* (1 Cor. 1:18). This is the paradox of the Christian faith. A paradox, by definition, is a statement that apparently contradicts itself and yet might be true. Is the cross really the power of God? How is it so? Blessed John Henry Newman explains: *In the Cross, and in Him who hung upon it, all things meet, all things subserve it, all things need it. It is their centre and their interpretation. For He was lifted up upon it, that He might draw all things unto Him*. In other words, the Cross is the key to understanding God, ourselves and no less the world and its history. The profession of faith that Peter makes at Caesarea Philippi, *'You are the Christ'*, and what follows, *'Get behind me, Satan! For you are thinking not as God does, but as humans do'* – this dialogue of faith on the one hand and rebuke on the other is expressive of the struggle of faith that at some level all those who truly wish to be disciples must endure. History bears witness to the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom established by our Lord. Again, Blessed John Henry Newman explains: *Such then is the law of Christ's kingdom, such is the paradox which is seen in its history. It belongs to the poor in spirit; it belongs to the persecuted, it is possessed by the meek, it is sustained by the patient. It conquers by suffering; it advances by retiring, it is made wise through foolishness* (*Sanctity the Token of the Christian Empire*, 1842). Our Lord leads us to this truth as He did His disciples; and we also, perhaps in a manner known only to God come to understand the truth and power of the *word of the Cross*. This is certainly evident in the lives of the Saints.

The earliest generations of Christians knew and appropriated this truth and they celebrated it. Tomorrow, September 14, is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a feast that was celebrated as early as the year 335. We will celebrate Holy Mass at 9:00 a.m. and I hope that if you

are able, you will come to Mass. This Feast, like the Gospel of the Mass today directs our attention to the Crucified Christ, the form and content of the Christian message. This Feast celebrates the *triumph* of the Cross: the victory of love over hatred, of life over death, of humility over pride, of forgiveness over resentment. In the economy of salvation, and in light of the mystery of the Cross, the mystery of self-giving love, we remember that nothing is wasted; no suffering patiently endured is without benefit to ourselves and to our brothers and sisters. This may explain why we see in each person who suffers *like Christ* a chosen soul, one whose sufferings are a source of consolation to the Church and the world. Again, this is evident in the lives of the Saints like Padre Pio, saints who were conformed to the Passion of Our Lord in a particular manner.

The Roman world where the Gospel was first preached was a brutal place, addicted to pleasure at the expense of others – often in cruelty beyond our imagining. It was a time when people were literally killed for entertainment. In God's Providence it was in such a culture that the Gospel was first preached and lived. In St. Peter's Square, in front of the Basilica, there stands an obelisk, a silent witness to that brutal time. It originally stood in the Circus of Nero where St. Peter was martyred, crucified upside down. It stands today as a witness to the death of the first pope and the Martyrs of the Roman Church. There is a cross at the top of this obelisk and at its base this inscription: *Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ rules. Christ defends his people from every evil.*

We who profess Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, our God and Saviour have a share in this victory. His victory is our victory because the *word of the cross...is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18)* at work in every time and place. It is our collective task as members of the Church and perhaps more importantly, our individual task as followers of our Lord to claim this victory especially in the face of human suffering and in the indifference of our times to the place and value of suffering in human life. Self-sacrifice, penance, mortification, discipline – these are not optional for a Christian but the expression of our willingness to follow our Lord who draws us into His saving work and in particular, into His Passion. This is why He left us the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as the memorial of His Passion; that we might always *glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, [and]through whom we are saved and delivered* (Entrance Antiphon, Exaltation of the Holy Cross, *The Roman Missal*).

On September 15, in logical sequence, the Church celebrates Our Lady of Sorrows, Mary at the foot of Cross. As He hung upon the cross our Lord said to the Beloved Disciple: *'Here is your mother.'* *And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (Jn. 19:27).* We have represented before us the Mystery of the Redemption as a perpetual reminder of the Mystery that is sacramentally re-presented on the Altar is the Mystery that we must live as Our Lord's faithful disciples. Here we celebrate it and profess our faith in it. When you return to your homes today and every time you assist at Holy Mass you are not alone for you bring with you the living memory of Our Lord's saving Passion and the tender compassion of His Holy Mother.