

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time: Embracing Our Christianity

"Oh, poor us, poor us," they moaned. "This is all so hard," they complained. "We are questioned for our beliefs, and we are often persecuted for our faith. Oh, poor us, poor us. We go to the market place and cannot buy the best meat because it was part of a pagan sacrifice. Oh, poor us, poor us. Our parents and grandparents were so excited by this new faith, this Christianity, but we are not all that excited. We put up with it though. We know it is right. But it is such a struggle to be Christians. Oh, poor us, poor us."

The people doing the complaining were those to whom today's second reading was addressed. These were Christians of Hebrew background living throughout the Roman Empire. Their fellow Jews had ostracized them. The pagan Romans were sporadically persecuting them. The original apostles were all dead, most of them killed. And it seemed that each new leader of a Church in this or that city, particularly in Rome, were given a death sentence by being made bishop. The first thirty-one Bishops of Rome, the first thirty-one popes, were put to death. Now there were rumors that Christians were to be persecuted throughout the empire.

The people to whom the *Letter to the Hebrews* was addressed also complained that they couldn't join in with the festivals of the people of their country. They were told that they couldn't be Christians and live like pagans. To many of these second and third generation Christians, Christianity was just too costly. So these Hebrews complained.

"Knock it off," says the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews*. "Shore up your drooping arms and firm up your knocking knees." Their body language showed how they felt. "Stop moping around," *Hebrews* says. "Instead, trust in God. If you are called to be a witness to God with your life, it will unite you closer to Him than you could ever imagine." The fact is that only a relative few would shed their blood for Christ. Most of them were called to give witness to their faith by the way they lived their lives.

So, would this living of the Christian life be easy? No, nothing worthwhile is easy. Everything of value has its price. In today's Gospel, Jesus called the price the narrow gate. The narrow gate is not the popular gate, but it is the only one that leads to God. Many people choose the wide gate, the way that everyone seems to be going. These are the people who justify their immorality with the "everyone's doing it," argument. Many people think that they can ignore God throughout their lives, that they can avoid sacrificing for others, that they can live in their selfishness. Simply put, they choose to live like pagans. They assume that God will not reject them when their lives come to an end, but they forget, they have already rejected God. They are not on the inside of the Banquet Hall because they have chosen to be outside the Kingdom of God. Their horrible sin is the sin of presumption. They presume that they will be saved despite their rejection of the Savior.

We cannot be the people of the wide gate. We have been given the call, the

grace, to enter into God's presence. But the way to get there is not easy. The gate is narrow. It demands sacrifice. It demands saying "No" to our own lower instincts. It demands saying, "No", to the popular but immoral crowd.

Jesus speaks about the sin of presumption in today's Gospel. Some people are not willing to make any sacrifices for the Kingdom of God. They have plenty of opportunity throughout their lives, but they ignore the call to follow Christ, the narrow way, and instead choose the wide path, the pagan way, the way of the "everybody is doing it" crowd. When they knock on the Master of the House's door, it is too late. The door has been shut. That is a figurative way of saying that when their lives on earth are over, they will demand entrance into heaven claiming that the Lord lived among them and taught in their community. They will feel entitled to enter into His Eternal Presence. But they have presumed His Mercy would be there for them without their ever lifting a finger to serve Him. Instead they will hear the Master saying, "Depart from me you evildoers."

When we act entitled, when we make presumptions on the mercy of God, it is because we have not fully recognized what it means to be a Christian. We have not embraced the cost of discipleship. To be a Christian means that we are willing to take up our crosses, deny ourselves, and follow the Lord. To be a Christian means that we are willing to endure whatever the pagan world throws at us rather than walk away from the Lord. "You're the only one at work, in the neighborhood, at school, who isn't doing this," they claim, lying by the way. "Perhaps, it would be better if you don't go to our party. We really don't want someone who isn't going to be part of the fun," they claim, deciding that sin is fun. Standing for the truth, standing for the Lord's way, is difficult. It is the narrow gate. This is the way to the Lord.

Sacrificing ourselves for others is also difficult. Making time for someone who is hurting, someone who is infirm, someone who is lonely, means denying ourselves the small breaks we have in our busy lives. But these acts of charity are life giving if our lives are centered on the Lord. I have never met anyone who has regretted sacrificing himself or herself for others. Instead, those who choose the narrow gate, the way of giving instead of taking, will always respond, "I got so much more out of that than I gave."

There are tremendous gifts showered upon us every time we embrace discipleship, no matter what its cost. "So," the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* tells us, "Lift up your drooping hands and shore up your weak knees." We need to stop complaining about what it costs to be a Christian and instead realize that our Christianity brings healing to a sick world. "Make straight paths for your feet that the lame might be healed." And then we can be a part of the joy that Isaiah prophesied in the first reading. Then we can be part of the glory of the people who are honored in the heavenly Jerusalem.

It is sad how we recognize the work necessary to advance in life, but we refuse to recognize the work that is necessary to attain the reason why we were created. We think that the goal of our lives, union with God, should be easy. We recognize the hard

work that is necessary for a person to become a lawyer or a doctor. We know that there is no easy button to push in med school or law school. We know that even the most intelligent of our young people have to work extremely hard to receive an academic scholarship. Even in the area of sports we recognize that what might appear easy on the football field during an NFL game on Sunday is the result of months of work in the classroom, in the weight room and on the practice field. What we see on the athletic field is a culmination of lives of hard work. We tell our young athletes, "No pain, no gain." But we think that the maxim only applies to athletes, or students. Its deepest application is to Christianity. None of us want to hear this, but we also want to hear the truth. And the truth is this: to be a follower of Jesus Christ we have to pick up our cross. With Jesus Christ "No pain is no gain." At the same time we need to embrace our Christianity with enthusiasm. We need to stop complaining about our sacrifices and look to the Cross of Jesus Christ. **The book of the cross is the wisdom of the Christian.**

We are **Catholics**. We are Christians in Christianity's purest form. We have purpose and meaning and beauty in our lives. We have Jesus Christ. And He has us. Our arms cannot be drooping. They need to be raised high in praising the One who calls us. Our knees should not be knocking. They need to be high stepping, marching through that narrow gate to our God.

Then, when it comes time for the final Banquet of the Lord, when our lives come to an end, we will find ourselves inside, united to Jesus at the feast of Love that is Eternal Union with God.