

22nd Sunday (A)

- Most of us want our lives to count; we want to leave some positive footprint behind us; to know that because we have been here, the world is somehow better. But how do we measure that success?
- Our world offers plenty of answers: money, influence, fame, power, possessions, achievement, status, good health, happiness and security.
- None of these is necessarily wrong; the problem comes when we begin to believe that these things can give our lives ultimate meaning or make us truly happy.
- The Gospel today challenges precisely that way of thinking.
- Last Sunday, Jesus asked his disciples, *"Who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered brilliantly: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*
- But Peter seems to have had his own understanding of what that meant.
- Jesus was successful; he healed people, challenged injustice, spoke with authority and drew people to himself.
- Surely following such a person would lead to success.
- Then Jesus tells them something they do not want to hear: that he will suffer, be rejected and killed.
- And Peter protests; he cannot imagine that this could possibly be part of God's plan.
- Jesus responds with startling words: *"You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."* - that is the heart of today's Gospel.
- Peter had recognised who Jesus was, but he had not yet understood what it meant to follow him.
- Jesus reveals that God's way is not the pursuit of power, status or self-preservation; it is the way of self-giving love.
- Jesus lived and died not for his own advancement, but to free people, restore their dignity and reveal the depth of God's love.
- And that brought him into conflict with those whose power depended upon things remaining unchanged.
- The cross was not something Jesus sought; he wasn't a lover of suffering.
- Rather, he was unwilling to abandon love, truth and compassion simply because doing so became dangerous.
- There is a powerful story from Dachau concentration camp.
- In 1943, twelve prisoners were randomly selected and hanged in retaliation for an escape.
- As the other prisoners watched, someone cried out, *"Where is God?"*
- There was silence.
- Then another voice answered: *"My God is hanging there."*
- That terrible story captures something profound about Christian faith.
- We believe that God does not stand safely outside human suffering.
- In Jesus, God enters into it; God takes flesh, suffers, dies & is raised to life.
- We have become so accustomed to the cross that we can forget its scandal.

- We wear crosses around our necks, place them on our buildings and display them in our churches, but the cross was never meant to become a comfortable religious decoration.
- It tells us that God is found wherever love is willing to remain present, even when the cost is high.
- That is why Jesus says, *"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let them renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*
- This does not mean that Christians should seek suffering or passively accept abuse, injustice or oppression.
- Jesus never glorified suffering for its own sake.
- Rather, we are called to remain faithful to love when love becomes costly.
- Sometimes our cross is suffering we cannot avoid.
- Sometimes it is standing beside someone who is suffering.
- Sometimes it is forgiving when resentment would be easier.
- Sometimes it is speaking for someone whose voice is ignored.
- Sometimes it is using our gifts, time and resources for others rather than keeping them exclusively for ourselves.
- In every genuine gift of love there is a cost.
- And this is where Paul's words become so important: *"Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but let your minds be renewed."*
- We are being asked to develop a different way of seeing.
- The world asks: What will make me successful?
- Jesus asks: What will make me loving?
- The world asks: What will I gain? Jesus asks: What can I give?
- The world asks: How can I protect myself?
- Jesus asks: Whose life can I help make more whole?
- And we cannot live this way simply through willpower.
- The Eucharist is at the heart of our Christian life because it is here that we receive the very life of Christ. It is not simply food for the body.
- It nourishes that deeper part of us - the part that makes us uniquely who we are and which can only truly flourish in relationship with God.
- We receive Christ so that we might become more like Christ: people whose lives become expressions of God's compassion, justice and love.
- So perhaps the real measure of a successful life is not how much we accumulate, how important we become, or how many people know our name; perhaps it is much simpler: Did we make others feel valued?
- Did we stand with someone who was suffering?
- Did we use what we were given for the good of others?
- Did our presence make God's love more visible in the world?
- The cross tells us that this is God's measure of success.
- And the extraordinary promise of our faith is that when we take up our cross in love, we never carry it alone.
- Christ is already there - literally, hanging in there with us.