

14TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

A young man at the end of his rope groaned in distress as he prayed, "Lord, I can't go on. My cross is too heavy to bear." "My son," the Lord replied with compassion, "if you can't bear its weight, come with me to the cross room. There you may exchange your cross for any other cross you choose." Filled with relief, the young man sighed, "Thank you, Lord." Briskly entering the cross room, he mindlessly discarded his own cross and searched for one he'd rather carry. He saw many other crosses, some were very large. Others seemed to be rough to the skin. The man searched the room until he spotted a tiny cross leaning against the far wall. "I'd like that one, Lord," he whispered. And the Lord replied, "My son, that is the cross you brought in."

Everyone has crosses to bear. I have heard stories of people who have struggled with addictions for many years and now finally have sobriety and struggle each day to regain their lives and make amends to those they hurt along the way. There are women who have to raise children alone, either because the husband left, died, or there never was a husband. There are people who care lovingly for a spouse who has Alzheimer's or has had a stroke, or is incapacitated from some other illness. Yet, they are there attending each day trying to make it a great day.

People battle with all sorts of burdens, most of which we are unaware, until we get to know them. We know this life has its share of burdens. We know that often we feel very alone in bearing those burdens. Jesus tells us, His followers, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." We need to hear this message, maybe over and over, until it finally sinks in.

Yet, I think why this message is often unheard or not believed is that we assume Jesus meant that if you trust in Him you will not fear, not be tempted by sin, and not struggle with anger or loneliness. When that doesn't happen the message seems empty or false. If it is true that we will still have difficulties in this life, what is the meaning of Christ's words?

First, we have to realize that life is difficult. Illness and pain are part of the human condition. It is so today and it was so for Jesus and the Apostles. Every religion has grappled with this problem. If God is good and caring why is life so hard? While there is no one answer that addresses this question for every circumstance at every time there might be a way to understand what Jesus is telling us today.

In Jesus' day many people carried around the burden of being an outcast from God. Their sins or their past made it difficult to serve God or to worship properly. For others the poverty or sickness they endured made it hard to hear the message of Christ that God loves them. Jesus came to show His people that the religion of their ancestors wasn't supposed to exclude, but be inclusive. He cured the sick, the blind, the lame and those who were lepers so they could hear and see God's message. He touched women who were bleeding, those grieving lost sons, and gentiles who thought they had no place in the Kingdom. Once freed, they were invited to come and follow Him.

People today also carry around burdens, some of which are unnecessary. There are the burdens of worrying about what other people think. We cannot change what another thinks or feels. There is the burden of worrying about the future. It is the future and will unfold in its

time. There is the guilt over the past. Once sins have been confessed they are forgiven. God never tires of forgiving, if we are willing to repent.

Jesus added that we are to take His yoke upon ourselves and then we will know rest for “His yoke is easy, and His burden is light”. In other words, we are to turn our burdens over to Christ and He will shoulder them with us. Then, we embrace His yoke of discipleship and we will know peace. We exchange our burdens for His.

Jesus was not burdened with fear or guilt. He had a relationship with the Father that was loving and sure. He knew that God would be by Him come what may. Jesus had a relationship of love with the Father that sustained Him when he was rejected by the crowds, or the Pharisees, or even his own disciples. He knew that religion was not so much about rules as it was about reverence for God and care for His people.

Jesus beckons us to let go of those things that burden us by yoking them to Christ and His power. Then, as we embrace His yoke of discipleship He invites us into the relationship He has with the Father. We soon discover a peace unlike any the world can give. He sends us forth to notice those around us who also are burdened by life and lighten their load. He calls us to be bearers of Good News to those who only see gloom and doom. If we do that all of our burdens won't magically disappear, but we will find a way to live with them even joyfully knowing we are not carrying them alone.