

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time September 12, 2021

“Get behind me, Satan!” If anyone unfamiliar with the Gospel reads these words, they will find it hard to believe that: (a) these are Jesus’ words; (b) they are used for Peter, one of Jesus’ closest disciples. How is it possible that Mark records a very embarrassing title, ‘Satan’, for one whom Jesus chose as Rock and Head of his Church? Evidently, Mark couldn’t have invented the Satan saying; Jesus must have certainly called Peter ‘Satan’. Why?

Like any other Jew of his time, Peter waited expectantly for the coming of the Messiah, who, according to prophecies, would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. At that time, different groups had different expectations of what the Messiah would be like. The Pharisees expected the Messiah to be a ‘New Moses’ making the Law more strict, while the zealots wanted him to overthrow the Romans and build a powerful kingdom. Jesus was different.

Mark tells his readers that Jesus is the Messiah, but not a populist one swept by the whims and fancies of the masses. Jesus’ Messianic mission is all about selfless service and sacrificial love. This is powerfully prophesied in the first reading from the so-called ‘Third Song of the Suffering Servant’. It describes a righteous man who willingly takes upon himself the guilt of the people so that he can suffer for them: “I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard.”

Written between 587 and 528 BC, when the people are suffering in exile because of their sins, the ‘suffering servant’ passage brings consolation amid their desolation. The people longingly look for that day when their sins will be atoned for and God will lead them home. The servant suffers neither because suffering is good nor because he is a masochist. But, he is ready to sacrifice himself and suffer out of deep love for God and his people.

And so enters Jesus, and he is acclaimed as King and Messiah because of his words and wonders. Everyone wants him to perform magic, multiply bread, heal lepers, raise the dead and then grab political power. Although Jesus feeds the hungry and heals the broken, he has nothing to do with violent nationalism and political power. He seeks to promote life, and this is only possible if one is willing to serve and sacrifice – even unto death.

Peter symbolizes you and me. We know Jesus. Despite Dan Brown’s ‘Da Vinci Code’ portraying Jesus as Mary Magdalene’s husband and, Hugh Schonfield’s ‘The Passover Plot’ telling us that Jesus was merely sedated on the cross and did not die, we declare: “Jesus, you are the Christ!” But, what happens when suffering swamps us

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and Jesus invites us to follow in his footsteps? This is probably when the Satan in us entices us to pursue pleasure and seek self-gratification, not self-renunciation

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”, says Jesus, adding, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.” Peter’s initial satanic impulse turns into ultimate saintliness when he declares after the resurrection, “Lord, you know that I love you!” (Jn 21:15). Peter will, eventually, follow Jesus faithfully and be crucified, upside down.

Our cross can come in the form of old age, an on-going illness, death, failure on exams, an intolerable spouse, addiction, loneliness or a lack of meaning in life. Such situations demand self-renunciation, selfless service, and sacrificial love. We all can think of family members and friends who have carried their crosses courageously. In my own life: my father who died of cancer, my mother who has been a widow for 28 years, my sister who struggles with cancer, my 94 year old uncle’s fight each day to carry on. And so we pick up our own cross each day and follow Jesus to Calvary.