

Homily for 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Isa 50:5-9; Ps 114(116); James 2:14-18; Mk 8:27-35

Theme: **Suffering is not our Portion? Re-examining our Understanding of Christ**

No one wants to take a suffering person as a model. We all want to identify with success, not failure. But, unfortunately, today some Christians link their faith to how successful they become, and suffering or poverty is the portion of those who do not have faith. The readings today challenge that understanding.

In our first reading, we hear a passage from one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant. There are four of such messianic songs in Isaiah 40-55 (cf. Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). Our passage today is from the third song. This song focuses on the trust of the Servant and his obedience to God. This obedience of the Servant is contrasted with the failure and disobedience of the people of Israel (cf. Isa 50:2). The Lord has given him a disciple's tongue (cf. v. 4). The role of the disciple is to learn and listen to the master. The first words in our reading say, 'the Lord has opened my ear.' To open one's ear is to enable one receptive to what is being said. Because he is a faithful disciple, he makes no resistance to the word of God. He cooperates with the will of God. He offers his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who tore at his beard. He doesn't run away from insult and humiliation. He stands firm in the face of all these because he trusts in the Lord. 'The Lord comes to my help so that I am untouched by the insults.' His trust in the Lord raises him above suffering, and he can stand before anyone who has a case against him.

The Responsorial Psalm continues the same theme of trust in the Lord. Although the snares of death surrounded him, with the anguish of the tomb, the Psalmist calls on the Lord to deliver him. His faith is in the Lord. Thus, God kept his soul from death. He will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living. Putting the suffering servant and the words of the Psalmist together, we see that they all point to the image of the Messiah, Mashiach in Hebrew, and Christos in Greek, meaning the Anointed One.

In the gospel, Jesus puts his disciples to the task. He was with his disciples in the district of Caesarea Philippi. In this area, Herod had a palace. There was a big temple called the temple of Pan a short distance from the palace. Within that region, Jesus asked his disciples the challenging question: who do the people say I am? They told him that some say 'John the Baptist, others Elijah or one of the prophets.' Then Jesus turned to them – who do you say I am? Peter responded on behalf of the others. *σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός* you are the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ! Immediately, Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus began to tell them the mission of the Messiah. He is the suffering servant. The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously, be rejected and put to death, and rise on the third day. Peter is happy to be identified with the Messiah but not the suffering one. And so, he takes Jesus aside, rebuking him that suffering must not be his portion. He has no faith in the Suffering Messiah. And Jesus responded swiftly to Peter: Get behind me, Satan, because the way you think is not God's way but man's. Peter, who had just declared that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah, suffers a rebuke.

An excellent lesson for us. Never be deceived that you are always under the influence of the spirit of God. Satan could find a way into our thoughts and actions in his tricky way as he did to Peter. Another lesson is that when we are at the summit of a spiritual experience, we must be careful because Satan can come in to bring us down. When the Bible speaks about Satan, it refers to the enemy or adversary of God or of God's children. Jesus rebukes the spirit in Peter because he has moved from a faith declaration in the Messiah to a no faith attitude of the world. Every follower of Jesus must renounce himself, take up his cross and follow him. That is the only way to save one's life for the kingdom of God. The one who has faith in the

world and things of the world loses eternal life. Jesus challenges us today that following him is not a bed of roses. Challenges and difficulties accompany our discipleship. Our faith is only tested when we see the face of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, in our daily struggles.

James tells us in the second reading that faith without good works is dead, and our following Jesus is put to the test in the way we live out our faith. That faith moves us to action, good works. When Satan is at work, he turns our minds on the things of men, not of God. When James talks about faith and works, it is an invitation to share God's love for creation, especially showing love to other human beings. James is talking about concrete works of charity. When I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty, you gave drink, naked, you clothed me, in prison and sick you visited me (cf. Matt 25). We will be judged on how our faith moved us to charity. We shall not be judged based on the material things we acquired as a sign that God blessed us on earth. If our faith does not move us to charity, we will be heading to eternal death. In other words, no matter how we claim to know God and believe in him, our faith is not alive without good works of charity.