

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Dearly beloved,

In today's Epistle, St. Paul urges us to walk wisely rather than unwisely, that is, to act with wisdom as our guiding principle. Wisdom is defined by St. Thomas as a share in the vision God has for creation, seeing things as a whole rather than as parts, seeing the world as God sees it because He is our friend through the virtue of charity. For Paul, the concept of wisdom was simpler, though obviously related to Thomas' definition: wisdom is the Cross. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul notes that many men tried to reach God through their human wisdom and failed because of pride. In response to this, God gave mankind the Cross: a foolish idea to those who do not believe, but true wisdom and power to those who allow themselves to be shaped by the mystery.

The essence of the Cross is captured by Christ in his words, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it." The Cross means that we deny ourselves and follow Christ, and lose ourselves in following Him. We are called to deny ourselves first, because we are broken by sin and thus we often easily err about what we really want or need. Original sin has led to thousands of years of personal sins such that each of us bears the weight of generations of sinners, and we bear that most acutely in the brokenness of our parents and families, who shape us so deeply when we are young.

Thus the deep desires of our hearts for love and fulfillment can often be skewed, even though they are noble desires. Only the Cross tells us that fidelity and sacrifice in the face of suffering is greater than seeking what I perceive as my own personal good; that struggling against my misguided or misdirected yearning for intimacy and acceptance, most likely the yearning for love missing from my first fragile years of life, that this struggling is good and holy and will make me happier and closer to God than will following my own desires. When we deny ourselves, we can say with Ignatius of Antioch, "Now I begin to be a disciple of Christ." The Gospel orients us toward the fulfillment of our loftiest desires, and through the Cross.

But we not only deny ourselves because our sinfulness makes us want things that will ultimately make us unhappy, we also bear our crosses in hope of an eternal reward. God rewards those who are faithful to Him, to the Gospel, to their marriage vows, to their religious vows, to the honest pursuit of the moral life—God rewards all who suffer for Him in these ways.

The world does not wish to know the wisdom of the Cross because it does not want to engage in earthly denial for a heavenly reward. It is a sort of fatalism that triumphs today, in which each person should grasp as much happiness as possible for himself regardless of the commitments he has made or the vows he has uttered or the wisdom found in the design of the universe and the human body. If my heart wants something, it should get it; I have a right to it. And if I want something, I should get it now, because there is no hope of God giving me that thing. And so, in the entire Western world, we have the encouragement of divorce and remarriage and homosexual unions despite such actions being incompatible with natural law, human morality and the Gospel. And at the root of it is a widespread belief that God is not just, that He does not reward those who sacrifice themselves for love of Him, that heaven does not exist, that man's ultimate desires are frustrated unless he takes it for himself here and now.

Because we live in this culture, we are inevitably tainted by this mentality. We don't have a lively belief in God's goodness and justice, His overflowing generosity towards those who love Him, and we begin to doubt that we will ever actually be rewarded for the sufferings no one else sees, for the sacrifices we make for our spouses and children and parents and siblings, for the unhappiness we endure in living out the Gospel and bearing our crosses. In short, we doubt that our actions have eternal value. And so Christ says to us, "Unless you see signs and wonders, you do not believe." Unless you see clear indications that the good you do is blessed by God, you lose heart. Unless you receive temporal signs of an eternal reward, you begin to doubt.

So in light of this recurring doubt, we should recommit ourselves again to embracing the Cross, to finding our wisdom in the Cross. Deep joy and peace come from bearing our crosses, for we know that by fidelity to them, we are doing God's will. Moreover, we learn who we really are through commitment to the Cross, which means commitment to vows, to difficult situations, to struggling for virtue, to fighting against complacency and worldliness, to confessing our sins. Finally, the Cross allows us to offer ourselves to the God who died for us, to suffer with Him and for Him, to have a heart marked by the love of Christ such that the Father will recognize us when we come to judgment.

To do this, though, we need two things: friends and a word that will sustain us. Christianity is not an isolationist religion; it is lived out by a community. And so each of us needs friends who encourage us in virtue, who drag us out of despair, who bring us back to the supernatural when we have yet again become mired in the natural. There is particular need for unmarried men to help other unmarried men and unmarried women to help unmarried women so that the loneliness of such a life does not issue in despair and hatred of the Cross but in hope and perseverance.

And a word to sustain us: in the Communion antiphon, the Psalmist says to God: "Meménto verbi tui servo tuo, Dómine, in quo mihi spem dedísti: hæc me consoláta est in humilitáte mea." Remember your word to your servant, O Lord, in which you gave me hope; this consoled me in my humiliation. Each of us should have some Scriptural phrases in our hearts to say quietly when we are disheartened and need to remember the value of the Cross. Psalm 55: You have placed my tears in your sight, O God. Or Psalm 18: If I do not let my sins dominate me, then I will be immaculate, cleansed from my great sin. Or Jeremiah 29: I know that thoughts I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of affliction; you will seek me and you will find me. Whatever the verse that consoles us most, we should turn to it when we are weary, that our courage and hope might be restored again.

So as we go forward to share in the fruits of the Cross of Christ, may we consider the words of Thomas a Kempis and resolve to follow Our Lord today and always, no matter how bitter the trial: "In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; ... in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; ... in the Cross is perfection of holiness." May God grant us the grace to bear our share of the Cross with hope and courage such that we reach the New Jerusalem and hear the words, "Come, blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."