

ORDINARY SUNDAY XXIII "C"
SEPTEMBER 7/8, 2019

As Jesus and his disciples are making their way to Jerusalem he bluntly states that choosing to follow him bears a cost—the cross. This was no pious sentiment. His listeners immediately comprehend the consequences of his pronouncement. Outside the city gates of any large city of the Roman Empire you would find several upright poles anchored in the ground. On any given day passersby confronted one or more naked bodies of convicted criminals affixed to a cross bar hung from these posts, some left hanging for days. This gruesome sight was used by the Roman government to teach a lesson—unquestioning compliance with the dictates of the empire is expected of every citizen; dissent or rebellion in any form will be swiftly crushed. For Jesus' listeners and the early Christian Church, a cross was anything but sentimental or ornamental-- a piece of costume jewelry; an embroidered embellishment on the pockets of jeans, wallet or purse.

While Jesus' listeners would have comprehended his use of the image of the cross, their thoughts would not likely have been focused on its torturous physical suffering and death (though they well understood that). This scene and Jesus' words occur *before* the events of Jesus' passion and death on the cross. In his statement about the cross and the two parables attached to it, Jesus directs his listeners, and us, to reflect on the "cost" of being his disciple. Jesus lays out that carrying your cross is the price of willingly shouldering the choices, burdens and realities of a life committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now, a choice that exacts a cost when such advocacy and action might lead to opposition and even outright rejection from members of your family, fellow parishioners, co-workers, and community. Seen through the eyes of St. Luke's telling of the life and teaching of Jesus, it means carrying forward the ministry of Jesus especially through seeing, advocating, and serving those whom the world overlooks; the marginalized, the poor materially and spiritually.

The church possess a large and consistent body of social justice teaching tradition based in the Scriptures and elaborated on by Saints, Popes and Bishops down the centuries on the dignity and sanctity of on human life from the moment of conception to natural death. Every human person bears the imprint of God's own life, indeed created in the "image and likeness of

God” (Gn. 1:27). Any direct, willful act to destroying human life--murder, abortion, euthanasia (so-called “mercy killing” or “death with dignity”) is a direct assault on the sanctity of human life and dignity given by God. This fundamental teaching of the church, however, is *not* limited to one, or a select few, assaults on human life and dignity. Faced with calls for greater use of the death penalty, do we equally advocate for use of available non-violent means that both protect society from those who would harm it, but do not directly take “life for life”? What does being “pro-life” demand of us when it comes to increasing racist rhetoric and nativist white supremacy rallies? While needing to work for immigration laws that both secure our borders and provide a legal safe and welcoming home to those fleeing oppression and war in their native lands, what do the images and conditions faced by migrants and refugees already here in our nation call us to? In the face of increasing gun violence that robs the gift of life from our fellow citizens, their families, and communities, what response do we give to proposed laws that protect us and continue to permit legitimate ownership and use of guns? In the faces of the poor, the homeless, the incarcerated, the addict, the mentally ill, in the media, whose face do we see? How willing am I to risk a “Jesus-like” response in word and action? How much risk am I willing to take for the Gospel, the cross? Will it be only “thoughts and prayers”—what the German Lutheran theologian and martyr for his opposition to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government--Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed “cheap grace”? I’m not suggesting I have quick and easy answers to these and similar questions and situations for myself, much less propose some to you. As a disciple, I too, struggle with my own conscience and response to Jesus’ call to “carry the cross.”

The Gospel of Luke has a central message: God’s mercy, in the person of Jesus Christ offered to all without exception. However, it has one condition, our willingness to bear the price of the cross-- making God and the Kingdom the primary focus of our life. On the road to Jerusalem today Jesus asks each of us whether we’re willing to pay the price.

8 September, 2019
Father Jim Secora