

HOMILY OF THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

A story was told of a wealthy man who had neither wife nor children and whose parents had passed away. One day the man organized a dinner and invited all his employees. After the dinner he presented two precious gifts to his guests but each of them had to make a choice. The two gifts were: an envelope containing certain amount of money unknown to the guest and a copy of the bible. He told them never to shy away from following their heart desire, in other words, they should choose freely. Each one of them had reason to choose the bible and also the reason to choose the envelope. Although they had the desire to choose the bible, due to their level of poverty, the need to cater for their immediate problems left them with little or no option than to go for the envelope. So each of them chose envelope in preference of the bible. The last to receive the gift was the youngest and the poorest of them all. On his approach, almost everybody could predict his choice, envelope, not only because he was poorest of them all but more, because of the situation at hand. His mother was bedridden, his father a loafer, and himself a school dropout. But when he arrived, he said, although, I need money to cater for my immediate needs which stare at my face this moment and which is not hidden from any of you, I prefer the bible because my mother told me that Jesus is the answer to every problem. On receiving the bible, he opened it and found two envelopes, one contained a cheque that has twice the money in the envelope given to each of the other guest and another was the rich man's will that makes him (the person that would pick the bible), the heir of the rich man's property.

The message of the cross sounds stupid to the world and the worldly - minded people because of ignorance. All they know and treasure is the world and its pleasures, but the children of the kingdom who are of the other world – heaven - treasure it dearly as the only veritable means to get to their destination – union with God. St. Paul confessed that all he held dear when he was still in that boat of ignorance, he discarded considering them as worthless when he discovered the message of the cross (Phil. 3:8). The foolishness of God, he said, is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1Cor. 1:25).

The message of the cross was despicable in the time of St. Paul as the scripture placed a serious curse on anyone who will be hung on it. “Curse be to anyone who hung on tree” (Deut. 21:22, Gal.3:13). So the Jews could not understand why anybody should be talking about or associate himself/herself with it. So, for them, it was madness and stupidity talking about it. This notwithstanding, Paul was so proud and bold preaching it. This was because, choosing to die on the cross, Christ has changed its meaning from the sign of curse to the sign of victory, from being despicable to being glorious. This knowledge was clear to Paul but not to either the Jews or the Greeks. Hence, St. Paul, his contemporary and many after them, not only preach the cross but also bore eloquent testimony to it by dying in its defense. Jesus had earlier stated that no one will enter the kingdom of God unless he denies himself and picks up his cross daily and follows Him (Lk. 9:23; Mt. 16:24).

The road to success is always thorny and filled with a lot of huddles and other forms of difficulties, a more reason why many dread it, but only those few who will persevere in carrying will eventually be saved. To choose the way of God we must be ready to offer many sacrifices, endure a lot of pains patiently. Above all, we should be ready to suffer persecution like our master, but we are sure that eventually success awaits us at the end of the road.

The Jews of Paul's time, like the time of Jesus, always look for signs, wonders and miracles as proofs that one comes from God while the Greeks, as philosopher, always look for the rational attainability of any claim. But the message of the cross was seen as foolishness by the Jews and as madness by the Gentiles. Like in the leading story, where the poor boy was looked upon as being foolish because rather than choosing the envelope which would have helped to solve his immediate needs, he preferred the bible. In the same way the defenders and followers of the cross are seen as fools because they choose the 'despicable' way of the cross.

Often we seem to be more interested in the miracles of Jesus than Jesus of the miracles. The message of the cross goes beyond the miracles, signs and wonders or even wisdom and knowledge. Only faith can comprehend and penetrate its depth. It is the message that disposes us for bearing witness to Christ with our possessions, our time and even our life with little expectation of miracles.

The message of the cross is the message of HOPE. The message of the message of VICTORY. The message of the cross is the message of LOVE. The message of the cross is the message of SALVATION.

Yes, the cross offers us hope in the resurrection of the dead on the last day. Hope that after our toil here we shall all gather before the Lord of the universe, who will wipe away our tears and we shall behold His presence for all eternity.

It is the message of Victory because just as our hero, after being subjected to inhuman torture, victoriously rose from the dead, those who persevere in bearing their cross for the love of Christ, will eventually be victorious and comforted for all eternity in heaven.

The whole aspiration of every Christian is to be saved on the last day. This salvation that is the yearning of every follower of Christ is wrought on the cross, this implies that to be an enemy of the cross is to be an enemy of salvation.

Finally, the message of the cross is the message of love. A gaze or even a simple look on the cross shows one a naked victor and tells him what love has subjected the Son of God. The cross speaks eloquently about God's love for humanity and call its admirers, compellingly, to reciprocate such unmerited love. We are called upon not to treat this message of the cross with levity or apathy since it the message of our salvation.