

**Life is difficult!** This is the opening sentence of Scott Peck's book, **The Road Less Traveled**, and I think there would be few of us here today who would argue with the truth of that statement. Even when our lives are well grounded, even when things are going smoothly, it does not take long before something challenges us, something attacks us, something causes us pain. As Roseann-Roseannadana used to say on the old Saturday Night Live, **"It's always something; if it's not one thing, it's another."** Each one of us has a cross to carry, and carrying that cross makes life difficult.

The hope that comes from today's Gospel is this: *that which is difficult can also be good.* When Jesus says to his disciples that they must take up their cross and follow him, he is not assigning them a punishment. He is offering the assurance that when they take up a difficult part of life and carry it as a cross after Jesus, it need not destroy them. In fact it can have the power to strengthen them and open them more to life.

A famous Italian violin maker was known to carefully select the wood for his violins from the north side of the tree trunk. When people questioned him about this, he pointed out that it was the north side of the tree that faced the brunt of the storm. It was that side of the tree that was buffeted by the wind and the rain. As a result, the wood on that side was stronger and more resilient. He found that if he shaped his violins from the wood on the north side of the tree, both the tone and the timbre of those instruments would be richer. Therefore, when the

winds came and the rains struck, one could hear the trees of the forest groan under the violence of the storm. But the violin maker would only smile and say, ***“I love that sound, for it’s the sound of trees learning to be violins.”***

When Jesus says, in today’s Gospel, that we must take up our cross and follow him, he is pointing to a similar truth. As difficult as it can be to bear the burdens of life, they have the possibility of deepening us, teaching us, and allowing us to grow. It is often in times of stress or trouble that we make progress, that we hear things that otherwise we would not have the time or the patience to hear. **C. S. Lewis** says that ***“God whispers to us in our pleasures; God speaks to us in our conscience; but God shouts to us in our pain. Pain is the megaphone that God uses to rouse a deafened world.”*** Pain certainly seizes our attention.

Now we need to be careful here because to say that good can come from pain is not the same as saying pain is good. Sickness, suffering and death are evils and we should do all that we can to avoid them. But when evils must be faced, when they cannot be avoided, we are called to take them up as crosses to follow after Christ. When we do that, they have the potential to deepen us and to open us more to life.

I know this to be true because I have heard it from the testimony of so many people. During my formation, I had a summer ministry at Angela Hospice, there I spoke to a woman dying of cancer, who told me that

through God's help, she is more alive today than in any other moment of her life. At a former job, I talked to a college intern who shared with me of how his girlfriend dropped him after a three year relationship, and after he made his way through the pain, with God's help, he realized that he was a stronger person than he ever imagined himself to be. I get a chance to speak to young married couples now and then, one who I spoke with, who after their first major argument and all the hurt and pain and healing that it involved, could say that with God's help, their relationship today is deeper and more real than it was before. I've had lunch with an unemployed worker who shared with me that it was not until he lost his job that he began to realize how valuable his family was.

Life is difficult. Each one of us has a cross to bear. But the good news is that our cross is not a punishment but an opportunity. So when evil strikes, when pain begins, do not be afraid or despair. If we can take up our cross and carry it in Jesus' name, it need not paralyze us or destroy us. If wind storms can change trees into violins, then certainly the crosses we carry in Jesus' name, can transform us into genuine daughters and sons of God!

Praise Jesus Christ, now and forever, Amen!