

September Word of Life

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24)

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Jesus was half way through his public life. His mission was in full flow, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near, and he was preparing to go to Jerusalem. His disciples had begun to grasp the greatness of his mission and realised that he was the One sent by God, awaited by the whole People of Israel. They were looking forward to being freed from Roman rule and the dawn of a better world in which there would be peace and prosperity.

However, Jesus did not want to encourage these dreams and said clearly that his journey to Jerusalem would not lead to triumph but actually to rejection, suffering and death. He also revealed that he would rise again on the third day. Those words were so hard to understand and accept that Peter protested and was against such a crazy idea. In fact, he tried to dissuade Jesus.

After brusquely admonishing Peter, Jesus turned to the disciples with a very disturbing invitation.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

What was Jesus really asking his disciples then and now too, with these words? Does he want us to despise ourselves? Does he want us to devote ourselves to an ascetic life? Is he asking us to seek out suffering so as to be more pleasing to God? Or is he asking something else?

This Word of Life exhorts us to walk in Jesus' footsteps and be receptive to the values and demands of the Gospel in order to be ever more like him. This means living the whole of life fully, as he did, even when the shadow of the cross appears on our path.

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We cannot deny that each of us has our cross. Suffering in its various forms is part of human life, but it seems beyond our understanding and contrary to our desire for happiness. Yet it is precisely in this that Jesus teaches us to discover an unexpected light. It is like when you go into a dark church and discover how wonderful and bright the stained glass windows actually are from the inside, when they looked so dull and dreary from the outside!

If we want to follow him, Jesus asks us to reverse our value system, shifting ourselves away

from the centre of our world and rejecting the logic that seeks our own personal benefit. He wants us to pay more attention to other people's needs than to our own and to use our energy to make other people happy, as he did. He did not miss an opportunity to comfort and give hope to the people he met. Following this path of liberation from selfishness, we will grow in humanity and acquire the freedom that allows our personality to be completely fulfilled.

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Jesus invites us to be witnesses to the Gospel, even when this faithfulness is tested by a greater or lesser degree of understanding in the social context in which we live. Jesus is with us and he wants us to be with Him in staking our lives for the boldest of ideals, universal brotherhood and sisterhood, the civilisation of love.

This radicalness in love is a deep need of the human heart. We see it in key figures of non-Christian religions who followed the voice of their conscience right to the end. Gandhi wrote, *“If someone killed me and I died with prayer for the assassin on my lips, and God's remembrance and consciousness of His living presence in the sanctuary of my heart, then alone would I be said to have had the non-violence of the brave.”*

Chiara Lubich found the remedy for every personal wound and every disunity among persons, groups and peoples, in the mystery of Jesus crucified and forsaken. She shared her discovery with as many people as possible. In 2007, when an event organised by Movements and Communities from various Churches was held in Stuttgart, she wrote, *“Each one of us experiences sufferings in life that are at least a little like his. ... When we feel these sufferings, we have to remember that he made them his own. They are almost his presence, a sharing in his suffering. Let us do what Jesus did. He was not paralysed by suffering but added to his cry the words, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (Lk 23:46), re-abandoning himself to the Father. Like him, we too can go beyond suffering and overcome our trial by saying: ‘I love you in this, Jesus forsaken. I love you; it reminds me of you and is an expression of you, one of your many faces.’ Moreover, if in the next moment we throw ourselves into loving our brother or sister and doing what God asks of us, we will almost always experience that suffering is transformed into joy. ... Even in the circles in which we live - we can experience greater or smaller divisions that make us suffer. We have to recognize his face in these too, overcome the suffering within ourselves, and do everything possible to become brothers and sisters again. ... The pathway and model of the culture of communion is Jesus crucified and forsaken.”*

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