



November 12th

THE NEW SHOFAR

The more deeply the cross penetrates, the better; the more deprived of consolation that your suffering is, the purer it will be; the more creatures oppose us, the more closely shall we be united to God — St. Paul of the Cross;

Jesus keeps to his script: in Him scripture is fulfilled

Peter had at one time found himself in trouble when he was caught out trying to *lead* Jesus in the way he should go rather than to *following* him. I am sure his intentions were good, but no disciple can dictate the ways of salvation for God to follow. He was rebuked for thinking not as God does, but as human beings do. The rebuke was harsh: *Get behind me Satan*, an indication of the seriousness with which the Saviour took this challenge given by Peter. I do not blame Peter because Jesus had already made it clear that discipleship meant the disciple must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Jesus along the Way to a daily Golgotha, a daily cross. We desire to be the Lord's true disciples, but we are not disciples unless we do what he demands — deny ourselves rather than affirm ourselves, pick up our Cross daily, and follow Him. This is the only way, this way rather than doing our own thing, meaning thinking as he thinks, willing as he wills, choosing as he chooses, serving as he serves and loving as he loves.

Our lives are to be conformed to the priorities and values of this world

This was one of the ongoing temptations for those early Christians. Such were the dangers that Paul wrote to the Church in Rome rebuking his fellow believers and warning them *do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, pleasing and perfect*. His words lead us to come face-to-face with one of the most important issues in the spiritual life: Do we think as other human beings do and conform ourselves, our thought patterns, our way of life, to the customs and expectations of the world and of our age? Or do we seek to think as God does, to discern what his will is, and to allow him to renew our minds with his holy wisdom?

This is especially true about the Cross. St. Paul says his words about not conforming ourselves to this age immediately after he urges us, by God mercies, to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, our spiritual worship. Spiritual worship is an insufficient translation of the words St. Paul uses a Greek phrase that is best translated *the only adoration that makes sense*. The sole response to all God has done for us is to give of ourselves wholly and entirely – to God and through our brothers and sisters to God. Our worship, meant to be a total self-offering, and that includes and transfigures every aspect of life. The worship God wants of us is not simply making time for prayer, acts of charity and not breaking the commandments. The only worship of God that makes sense is for us to offer all we are and all we have to God, to deny ourselves anything we selfishly desire, to die to our ego, and to follow Christ freely along a path of total self-giving, of *making of ourselves a holy, pleasing, living sacrifice* to God and in him to others. It means living a cruciform life. When we come to the altar to receive Holy

Communion, what we bring with us are our struggles to live lives of total self-sacrifice. It is the once for all sacrifice of Jesus that our own personal cross-carrying is perfected.

The struggle is to be perfect as the Father is perfect

Because we struggle to think as God thinks, we end up tempted to water down what Jesus says are preconditions to being his follower. Jesus' first listeners would not have misunderstood what he was saying when he mentioned that the only way they could follow him is through denying themselves to the extent that they would pick up their Cross. They knew because in the ancient world, the cross was used exclusively for the gruesome capital punishment of crucifying someone. For Jesus to say that they needed to pick up the Cross and follow him meant that they need to die to themselves on the Cross just like Jesus did on his. As St. Paul, who picked up his cross every day after his conversion and followed the Lord, once wrote: *I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:19-20)*. Jesus wants us to be able to say the same thing. It is only when we have denied ourselves and affirmed God; it is only when we have in fact died to ourselves so that Christ may live; it is only when we have "lost" our life for the sake of Christ that we will "save" our life and be able to follow Christ to the joyful risen existence he suffered and died to give us. *This is certainly not man's wisdom, but it is God's wisdom!*

The crunch point comes when this applies to loving others

We can be good at striving earnestly to take up our crosses and following Jesus, in all but one area. It is difficult being as Christ to those who hurt us or in some way cause us mental, emotional, spiritual or physical harm. But that is exactly where our Christ-likeness is most needed. It is in our love for others, all others without judgment, without exception, that the world can see something of the living God in their midst. Identity politics governs the way we view others in our contemporary world. We are black or white, good or bad, of this religion or that, of this nation or that. We are this sex, that gender, with this political party or some other, disabled or not. The list seems to be endless when it comes to locking people away in little "boxes". Look at how that has shaped our present society and world order.

There is only one way of looking at others in the way God looks at them, in the way with which Jesus deals with them. They are our brothers and sisters, men and women valuable enough in the eyes of God, precious enough for the loving and merciful heart of God to send His only Son to die on the cross. It cost Jesus his life, the payment counted out in such unimaginable pain and suffering that death was a blessing.

Christ's way is narrow, winding and steep and many turn away

That is to be the standard we use for turning our lives into living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God. Of course, the humanity in us can always find exceptions for this absolute demand because some people are easier "to die" for, to accept and love as Jesus accepts and loves them than others are. We need to know, however, that our readiness for life in the Kingdom of God is predicated on this level of dying. Only by living in Christ can we access the grace needed for this cross-carrying. Our fruits, what our words and deeds produce will show us how close we truly are to Christ.