

The sign of the cross used to begin the homily. We made it on entering church – with holy water; at the start of Mass and again at the end – where it is a sign of blessing. Do we do it well. Or is it like a brushing away of crumbs? Is it something casual or superstitious (like footballers), or devout, as we recall the Trinity, Christ's Incarnation, suffering and death for us? Catholics often gave themselves away by making the sign of the cross as they passed the church, in honour of the Blessed Sacrament.

What it does is to make personal to us the reality of our Faith; that we have been claimed by Christ. At baptism we recognise that we are signed and sealed by this indelible mark. The sign of the cross brings comfort that Christ died for our salvation, but reminds us, too that we each carry our own personal cross through our calling as Christians.

We are perhaps so used to seeing the cross sculpted or in jewellery form that we no longer associate it the horror that was its main association.

When Jesus made his revelation to his disciples about his forthcoming passion, the effect would have been electric. Nothing could have been more remote from their expectation. At Caesarea Philippi Peter had just recognised Jesus as the Messiah. From that high point of revelation there could be no idea in the disciples' minds of what lay ahead.

This was indeed the turning point as Jesus turned towards Jerusalem and the dreadful confrontation on Calvary. The disciples would have to realise the future was not going to be the way of privilege and prosperity, but following Jesus on his path of suffering.

Peter tries to stop the unthinkable by taking Jesus aside and Jesus responds sharply, "Get behind me, Satan". In Peter's words, Jesus hears again the subtle temptation of the devil. Again, Jesus orders him away.

For Jesus there must have been the anguish that Peter who had spoken up in recognition of him, had so quickly fallen back into misunderstanding. That the rock could be a block. So Jesus expands his message on suffering: that to follow him means taking the difficult path of suffering. We cannot be Christians and just have the nice or easy parts of the Gospel. Our call is all or nothing. We must be totally committed.

The call can be uncomfortable – Jeremiah is the first reading finds that God's ways are too much of a burden. Or we might resist being called to be set apart from the world.

So much of the gospel is like a looking glass world. To reach the goal, the way seems to lead away from it. The poor are rich, the sad, happy, the humble are blessed and the way to eternal salvation is through death. No cross, no crown. It is only with hindsight that we see the reason for things and their blessing.

When we consider as foremost our final goal. Our priorities have to be radical. We have to turn away from the tempter's voice persuading us of an easier route. Are there things in our life that prevent us from taking up this challenge? Our own disposition, things we are unwilling to give up or to recognise in ourselves? Our sinfulness, our attachments? Allowing others to influence? Peer pressure can be huge.

We must follow the way of unconditional love, as Christ did. It does mean sacrifice, but, did any marriage not rely on such love? Only through giving will we receive. Bread must be broken to be shared. In our lives we can grow through hardship. Suffering can be redemptive. Our cross is not to be shunned, but united to the cross and suffering of Christ, we are reminded of the eternal glory which we share.

May we sign ourselves again as an acceptance of our calling: In the name of the Father....