

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Sept. 13)
Mark 8, 27-35

Christianity Oversimplified

Modern life, as we all know, is very complicated. As a reaction against this, there is a constant effort of simplification. There are simplified methods of learning languages, arts and sciences. We frequently read advertisements that promise us that we can learn this or achieve that in ten easy lessons. Sometimes these methods are good. But sometimes they are oversimplifications that do not really help us very much.

Some people have tried to simplify Christianity, but in the process succeeded only in oversimplifying and emasculating it. They say that Christianity means love — period. Then they start explaining love in their own way. It becomes sentiment, or concern, or activism, or sometimes, sad to say, just a convenient tag for whatever you want to do.

It is true that the whole Law and the Prophets hang on the double commandment of love of God and neighbour (Mt. 22, 34-40), and St. Paul says, "if you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligation (Rom. 13,8)." But let us not forget that Christ's teaching in its entirety is this: "Love one another; *just as I have loved you, you also must love one another*" (Jn. 13, 34). Christian love is not just any kind of love — it is self-sacrificing love, the love revealed by Christ hanging on the cross, suffering. In true Christianity, love and suffering go hand in hand.

In the Gospel story today, Peter readily accepted that Jesus is the Christ. But he found it very hard to accept that Jesus was going to fulfill his mission by suffering. So also today, many will accept Christianity as the religion of love; but at the same time they find it difficult to accept, and indeed they categorically reject, the teaching of Christ about sacrifice, suffering, self-abnegation.

Let us take just one example. Many people have fallen in love with the idea that marriage must be dominated entirely by love. This is a very attractive proposition. But its value depends on what you understand by love. To some people, "love" simply means sexual gratification. It is synonymous with selfishness, the search for maximum pleasure at the expense of other values, a disregard for the right of God to give the laws regulating man's use of his body and its functions. This kind of love certainly never goes hand in hand with self-denial.

True Christian love in marriage "involves not only the senses, but the spirit at the same time. It is not, then, a simple transport of instinct and sentiment, but also, and principally, an act of the free will, intended to endure and grow by means of the joys and sorrows of daily life, in such a way that husband and wife become one only heart and one only soul, and together attain their human perfection" (*Humanae Vitae*, 9). Authentic Christian love exists in marriage when "husband and wife generously share everything, without undue reservations or selfish calculations" (*ibid.*). Genuine Christian conjugal love remains faithful in spite of difficulties. Most of all, it is a love which "is not exhausted by the communion between husband and wife, but is destined to continue, raising up new lives" in spite of sacrifices and self-abnegations required by this task.

When we think of conjugal love today, do we think of it as the other side of a coin where renunciation and daily cross is written, or do we think of it in the oversimplified form of joy without tears? Do christians still think in terms of true Christianity, or have they gone over to Christianity oversimplified and therefore falsified?

Today's gospel puts up a warning. It is not enough to recognize that Jesus is the Christ. We must also remember Jesus as the one who said, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me."