

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 8:27-35

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

REFLECTION 1: ON BEING A CHRISTIAN – THE COST

In recent times we marked the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. In Washington DC there is a monument to remember the men who gave their lives so that women and children could have the lifeboats. Every year the members of the Men's Titanic Society gather at the monument around midnight to drink a toast to the brave men who sacrificed themselves in the frigid waters on that fateful night.

Jesus tells his disciples, 'whoever wants to save their life will lose it and whoever loses their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it'. We may wonder if we have the courage to follow this teaching. Perhaps when the moment confronts us, there will arise within us an unknown power to make the hard decisions.

As far as we can tell, few of Jesus' first followers carried out their commitment to die with Jesus in the same physical way in which he died – to suffer physical death because of their discipleship of being a Christian. But the evangelist was convinced that everyone could imitate Jesus' psychological death. So, Mark demonstrates the way we are to die with Jesus in three successive chapters and the first of these is in the Gospel selected for today. The evangelist begins each episode with Jesus predicting his suffering, death and resurrection. Someone then says or does something that shows they have completely misunderstood what it means to die. And finally, Jesus corrects this misunderstanding, showing what dying with him really means. In today's narrative, Peter who had just acknowledged Jesus as the Christ is given the role of misunderstanding what it means to imitate Jesus' suffering and death. So, Peter took Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Jesus' harsh command 'Get behind me Satan', follows the comment. He wants to nip such a 'no death heresy' in the bud, before it infects the whole community. The word 'Satan' here is a code word in Hebrew meaning 'an obstacle in someone's path,' and this seems to be how Jesus employs it. Being a disciple means someone who follows behind someone else – a leader – so what Jesus is saying to Peter is simply this – 'Stop being an obstacle to my ministry, Peter! Get your unbelieving face out from in front of me and go behind me, be a disciple. Do what I do, not what you would like me to do!'

Jesus' clarification is one of the best-known passages in scripture. 'Those who wish to come after me, must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For those who wish to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for my sake will save them'.

For Mark, being open, willing to carry out whatever God asks us to do, is the first step in dying with Jesus, the first step in becoming another Christ. Jesus, who immerses himself completely in the human

condition, experienced every sort and every degree of suffering in order to translate that experience into an eloquent expression of love. That suffering identified Jesus as the Christ the Messiah, the promised one and Saviour.

Sigmund Freud said that we human beings are threatened by suffering from three directions, from our own bodies, which are doomed to decay sending out pain and anxiety as warning signals. From the external world which may wage against us with merciless forces of destruction and finally from our relationship with others – perhaps the most painful of all. So, our sufferings, from whatever source, when united with those of Jesus Christ, identify us as his own – it's the cost of being a Christian.

REFLECTION 2: DEFINED BY SUFFERING

Lord Byron had a clubfoot, Robert Louis Stevenson and John Keats suffered from T.B., Alexander Pope was a hunchback, Julius Caesar was an epileptic and both Thomas Edison and Beethoven were deaf. The significant thing about each of these is that they achieved mightily in the face of what many would have considered to be a cross. We might ponder and ask ourselves if God asked us to carry one of these crosses, which one would we choose?

In today's Gospel, Jesus heads for Jerusalem where death awaits him. Yet, some who walked with Jesus did not understand who Jesus really was, so they left him because of what true discipleship required. During the Second World War, when Winston Churchill became prime minister of England, he declared as their leader that all he had to offer his fellow Brits was 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'. But just as Churchill did not ask anything of his fellow patriots that they were not willing to endure, so did Jesus identify the way for his disciples. His saving mission and his role as the Christ or Messiah would be defined and expressed through suffering. Judging from Peter's reaction to him, it is clear that Jesus' contemporaries did not expect their long awaited Messiah to be anything but a regal, powerful and strong leader. Their hopes rested on an end to foreign occupation and the restoration of Israel's political freedom and prestige. They were thinking not as God does but as human beings do. And who would fault them for that? Who would want to suffer? Most of our lives we spend avoiding suffering or we put up with it for a while leaving it only an unpleasant memory. Nevertheless despite the pain attached to suffering, Jesus challenges his followers to choose it as a means of redemption.

To take up one's cross does not mean accepting the difficulties of life, as one might say 'my arthritis is my cross to bear' or 'my mother-in-law is my cross'. Rather to take up one's cross is a free voluntary choice that calls for desire and resolve, not passive acceptance or mere miserable tolerance. The reason for such a choice is made known to us by Jesus in today's Gospel from Mark (Mk. 8: 27-35) where Jesus says 'it's for my sake and for that of the Gospel'. Those who willingly accept the suffering that results from their belonging to Jesus – who accept the hardship by living the Gospel, these are the ones who are truly Jesus' followers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who died under Nazi tyranny, stated that discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. We, for our part, are to be mindful that whatever we endure, it is for Jesus' sake and that of the Gospel and only then will our suffering have redemptive significance. So Jesus asks Peter 'who do people say I am?' He tells them that if they are willing to lose their lives for his sake and for the sake of the Gospel, they will thereby save their present lives and receive the gift of life eternal.