

## TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – September 12, 2001

Isaiah 50:5-9a; Psalm 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

I would be willing to bet that almost everyone here has asked a friend or someone you know what other people are saying or thinking about you. There are a lot of reasons we want to know what others think of us. We want to fit in; we want to be accepted. And there are times we change just to conform to other people's ideals. We want to identify with what other people think is popular and acceptable. And many of us often make decisions based on the way other people see things. The problem with this is that the people we are asking are probably doing the same thing! So who ultimately are we conforming to?

At first glance, that seems to be what Jesus is doing in today's gospel passage. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" But he's not asking them this to see where he stands in the latest polls. He already knows what they think of him. He is God, after all. Many times in the Gospels we read of how Jesus knows what is in other people's hearts, and knows what they are thinking. If this is true, why does Jesus ask his disciples this question? And if he already knows the answer to that question, why does he then ask them "But who do you say that I am?" Often times in the Gospel, when Jesus asks a question he is about to give a new teaching.

There are three distinct parts to today's Gospel Passage. This first part deals with the identity of Jesus. And Jesus' question "But who do you say that I am?" gets to the heart of the Gospel. Everything Mark has told us in his Gospel leads up to this event. This question is asked not only to Jesus' disciples, but to everyone who reads his Gospel. And Jesus asks this question not because he's curious to know the answer, but because he wants them to come to the understanding of just who he is. And when Peter says "You are the Christ, he says in effect "You are the one through whom everything God promised will be accomplished."

Peter and the other disciples don't have a complete understanding of what this all means, or the nature of Jesus' true identity. This is why Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about him. Otherwise they would be tempted to interpret all this according to their own worldly dreams and expectations. But it's different for us. We have two thousand years of Church teaching behind us to help us understand Jesus as Messiah and Savior. And yet far too often we, just like Peter and the other disciples, attach our own worldly expectations to who Jesus is.

Once his identity has been established, we move into the second part of this passage, and Jesus proceeds to explain what this means for him. His destiny, his role is to suffer, die, and rise. Notice the words Jesus uses here. "The Son of Man *must* suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." None of what would happen is a mistake or accident. It is exactly what was intended from the beginning.

Of course, Peter is horrified by this and becomes an obstacle to Jesus fulfilling his mission, and actually rebukes the one he just proclaimed was the Messiah. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine telling God that he's got it all wrong, that what he has planned should not happen? Of course, *we* would never do that. We would never tell God in prayer what *we* think he should do. Ah, but we do that all the time, don't we? We tell ourselves and others: "Certainly God would never do things this way, or expect us to do that." That's why Jesus tells Peter, "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." This echoes what God says through the prophet Isaiah:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

We are called to undergo a conversion—a completely new way of thinking—where we try to see and think as God does, and not as the world does. And this is not a one-time conversion of the mind. It's ongoing; it's a continuous process.

All of this brings us to the third and most challenging part of this Gospel passage. What does this mean for us? Jesus calls the crowd together and explains: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." What he is saying, in effect, is, "Don't think that following me is simply being a spectator to healings and miracles, and agreeing with what I say and teach." To follow Jesus means to go where he goes. And he made it very clear that his destination is the cross. In the parallel verse in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me." This, too, is not a one-time event. It's a continuous process of conversion.

Jesus is referring to a total change—not just in how we think, but in how we live. We must let go of all of our attachments and agendas, and have Jesus and his will for us as our central focus, even if that means letting go of a hold on our own life. Jesus wants us to think in terms of eternity. He warns us that the temptation to deny him in order to save our earthly life will lead only to sin and corruption, and ultimately, eternal death. But when we deny ourselves, as Jesus says, then we prepare ourselves to reach the ultimate fulfillment for which we were created—eternal life in communion with Jesus, his Blessed Mother, and all the saints who have gone before us.

This, of course, means that we will have to undergo suffering. "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Suffering can come in many different forms: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Our Biblical and Church Tradition teach us that undergoing pain and suffering are not an option. The mystery of God's grace is always at work in the life of every Christian and in the life of the Church, and it always involves suffering, and it always involves the process of dying and rising.

Suffering is not something that Jesus *desires* for us. He himself said at Gethsemane: "My Father, if it be possible, remove this chalice from me" (Mt 26:39a). But it is necessary: "nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Mt 26:39b). The key is to embrace the suffering that comes to us (and it *will* come) and unite it to the suffering and death of Jesus. Pain and suffering in and of itself does not lead to life. But when we embrace our suffering and unite it with Christ's Passion and death, we allow him to suffer with us. That doesn't necessarily take the suffering away, but rather it gives us the grace to endure what we are going through with Jesus, and our suffering can become redemptive, and not just for us, but also for the world when we offer it up for others.

The beauty in all this is that we are not alone in our pain and suffering. Jesus doesn't call us to pick up our cross alone. He calls us to follow him, which means that he walks with us on our way. Discipleship is a continuous contact with Jesus who doesn't just lead the way for us to follow, but walks with us helping us with our cross at every step.