

Today's Gospel passage follows the one we read last Sunday that recounts the great moment when Peter affirms that Jesus is the Messiah, "*the Son of the living God.*" After naming Peter as His successor to the new Church He has come to establish, Jesus shocks His Apostles when He tells them that He must suffer and die in Jerusalem. They simply could not imagine that Jesus will die. It makes no sense!

Peter thinks he understands better than Jesus what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of the living God. How can the Messiah experience defeat? How can God allow His Son to suffer and be killed? By denying that Jesus must suffer and die, Peter has made himself an obstacle or a stumbling block to Jesus carrying out His Father's will. Peter's fault lies in thinking not as God does, but as human beings do. When Peter tries to rebuke Jesus, Jesus turns to him and says, "*Get behind me, Satan!*"

These contrasting events take place within moments of each other. What happened? Jesus confronts His Apostles with the facts of the cross. This is a frightening request and difficult to understand. At that time, the cross was a symbol of the death sentence which the Roman Empire inflicted on criminals and marginalized people. No one desires this. Jesus foretells His suffering and death, and tells His Apostles that they too must be prepared to suffer. This thinking about the cross is revolutionary, and Jesus is persecuted and put to death for it. Now we can understand the shift in mood.

God's ways are very different from our human ways. We must never forget this. Like a coin that has heads and tails, the Gospel has two sides: the cross and the crown. If we try to embrace just one side, the glorious side, and reject the other side, the suffering side, we falsify the Gospel. The same Jesus who says, "*Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28), also says, "*Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.*"

In the Gospel, we have the picture of Peter struggling to follow the will of God. Peter finds it difficult to accept that the mission of Jesus will end with the cross and crucifixion. He does not see why pain and suffering are necessary for discipleship, and

he is anxious for Jesus to avoid this course of action. Just as Jesus obeys the will of God, even to death, He expects the same from those who follow Him as His disciples.

Like Peter, we don't want the cross of suffering in our lives. We want to bypass it, but we cannot. Like Peter, many of us may fail to grasp the role of suffering in God's plan. The cross is easily the most difficult stumbling block of our Catholic faith. We have all experienced our share of crosses in the form of sickness, aging, difficulties in marriage, depression, addictions, sin, wayward children or death in our family, and especially today as we experience the suffering of the coronavirus pandemic. Our Lord says that carrying the cross is the way we follow Him. It is how our discipleship becomes real and purified, like gold tried in fire is purified.

Often our lives are spent trying to avoid suffering. We don't like to suffer, and most of us have unanswered questions about suffering. Especially, we wonder how God, if He loves us, could allow us to suffer. The Gospel message provides answers to the question of suffering, but those answers may not be readily apparent. Throughout salvation history, we see that the ways of God are often not the ways of humanity. Perhaps the circumstances in which you find yourself appear to be dark and hopeless. But know you are not alone. Not only have others been where you are, but more importantly, Jesus has been where you are.

*Fair* is not part of the Gospel message though. Love and mercy are. God's generous justice is. Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary was not fair and it did not end persecution and suffering, *but it brought life*.

We hear from the Gospel that Christ gives a very clear picture that discipleship involves denying ourselves, taking up our cross with trust and confidence and following His footsteps along the road to Calvary. It's a *hard teaching* but the measure of greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is the way of the cross. The Gospel ends with a challenge from Jesus to *welcome* our crosses and to embrace our pain and personal suffering. We must trust in God's promise that He will help us to endure it.

The road to the Kingdom of God is never a straight one and suffering is a reality of human life. Yet this doesn't mean that suffering is something we Catholics should seek. Jesus did not seek suffering; Gethsemane made that clear. When the hour comes for Jesus to drink the cup of suffering and death, He does not find it easy. Jesus

undergoes a terrible agony and asks His Father to remove the chalice from Him. Nevertheless, Jesus remains faithful to the will of His Father and accepts the cross. We will also find that our cross will be an inescapably part of our Catholic life just as it was part of Jesus' life.

Everyone in the world has some kind of a cross to bear. The issue is what do we do with our cross. Do we deny it, rebel against it, kick it, curse it, or numb ourselves with addictive substances to make us forget it? Or do we take up the cross and follow Our Lord with it, and in doing so come to profound spiritual maturity?

Our Lord teaches us the great truth of our Catholic faith, that the cross is our way of life that leads to eternal life. The cross teaches us the truth, meaning that sin damages everything it touches. The cross teaches us that true love is sacrificial. The cross teaches us the truth about discipleship, that to follow Christ is to follow Him, not in spite of the cross we have, but through it. In faithful obedience to the Father's will, Jesus persevered. Jesus has assured us that our sufferings for the sake of the Gospel are small compared to the reward that awaits us in heaven. The place for the crown is heaven.

Yes, our crosses may be heavy. Sometimes unbearably so. But Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and follow Him. He gives us His Body and Blood as food for the journey, as we bear our sufferings and bring our imperfection to Calvary. As we carry our crosses, we can rejoice in a way that the early disciples could not. We know the story doesn't end on Calvary. We know that with Christ, there is life.

Furthermore, we are invited to participate in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross by uniting our sufferings to His. In offering our very selves as a living sacrifice, Saint Paul says we worship God and we can be transformed, becoming more holy as we are evermore united to the will of God. Our suffering is redemptive when offering it up in union with the suffering of Christ.

Today, we offer Christ what sufferings we experience because of following Him. Let us try to see our cross of difficulties, of sacrifices, and of sufferings as precious in the eyes of our God who makes all things right and who loves us beyond anything we could ever imagine. Through God's mercy and love, it means that suffering will not be the end of us.