

Some Difficult Verses

Today's Gospel text is a continuation of last week's text. Last week, Jesus was sending out the apostles to visit nearby towns in their first 'mission' trip to spread the Good News of Jesus. In the last part of last week's text and this week's text, Jesus cautions them that things will not always be easy for them as they do those things that Jesus did. Jesus says some things in this text that seem to be out of character for Him. These things do not fit in the image that we want for Jesus to be a mild, meek servant of God who is all about love, peace and understanding. But to help us understand these sayings, I think that we need to put this text and last week's text into context.

Jesus had just finished some teaching and healing in the text before last week's text, which if you recall, began at the end of chapter 9. He had realized that there was a lot of work to do and not necessarily enough time to do it all. In last week's text, Jesus is empowering the apostles to heal the sick and sends them out to prepare the towns for His arrival. But within these instructions, are words of caution. Jesus reminds the disciples that while there are adoring crowds right now, it won't always be that way. There will be push-back from those who have the most to lose if the Kingdom of God not only comes near but actually arrives.

This brings us to some of the more troubling statements from Jesus. In this text, there are at least four troublesome verses. A sermon could be crafted around any of these sayings, explaining in detail what they mean and its implication for us. However, for this sermon, we will take a cursory look at them as a bit of food for thought for you. It is clear that Jesus is telling the apostles, telling us, that things will not automatically come easy in spreading the Good News. One of these troubling verses is where Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to

bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." This does not fit in well with the image of the peaceful Messiah that we expect, that we want, to find in the Gospels. But I think that maybe we have been hearing these words in the wrong way. Jesus is not being predictive here, but rather descriptive. Jesus is telling us the effect that He will have on people. Jesus is cautioning us that because of the truly radicalness of His message; that the old order will be turned upside-down, that people will lose power over others, then there will those who will try to stop the Kingdom from coming and preserve their power. Jesus knows that in the end, when the Kingdom of God is fully here on earth, everything will be fine, but until then the in-between times will be tumultuous. Some people will decide to believe in Him, while others will not, they will cling to the old order of things, the old understanding of power and how to use it. Jesus is telling us that these conflicts will affect even the most basic of human relationships.

Another troublesome verse is where Jesus tells us what will happen if we deny or acknowledge Him. This verse is often attached to chain emails that try to shame you into passing the email along, indicating that if you don't send it on, then you are denying Jesus. I would think that Jesus was meaning something a 'bit' different than whether or not we pass along a chain letter as the way for us to achieve salvation. I think that Jesus meant that if we do acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, accept His teachings and live that way, then we are acknowledging Him. If we do otherwise, then we are denying Him. In other words, it is a matter of living the faith that we say we have.

A third troublesome and often misunderstood verse is about taking up one's cross. Jesus said, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not

worthy of me." Before we attach all of our 21st century understanding of what it means to pick up one's cross, we first need to understand how those first disciples would have heard these words. By the time of Jesus, Rome had been in control of Israel and the surrounding areas for a couple of generations. Most of Jesus' contemporaries would not have known what it was like not to be living under Roman domination. The Romans had 'perfected' the killing of a person on a cross - they could prolong it for days or have someone die in a short period of time; it was the most humiliating way to die, the person was stripped bare and hung out in the open, usually alongside a roadway to show to everyone what would happen to you if you committed a crime against the empire. Any connection to the Jewish understanding with Moses holding up a bronze snake on a stick would have been lost in the brutulness of the Roman crucifixion. Perhaps Jesus was actually referring to Moses and the bronze serpent in this verse, indicating that anyone who looked to Jesus would have life. Another connection is one that Paul makes when he talks about dying to our old self and rising anew in the life of Jesus. We are to die to our old selves, a self that is guilty of living apart from God and being guilty of that, are deserving of death. A third possibility would be that we are to deny ourselves and what we want and live in service to others much like Jesus lived.

The last troublesome verse would be the last verse of the text, the one about losing one's life and finding one's life. It almost sounds like it could be found in a fortune cookie - it has that profound, head-scratching, metaphysical tone to it. But, if we look at this verse in connection with how we looked at these other troublesome verses, we can get a bit of a better understanding of what Jesus was wanting us to hear. If we determine what our place in the world is and

cling to that, then in the end, we will end up losing our eternal life. However, if we give up our life, give up trying to have control over our lives and what happens around us and follow *God's* will, then we will find eternal life with *God*.

That is where the *Good News* can be found. Despite being cautioned that a life following *Jesus* will not always be easy, we are given the assurance that because of the transformative nature of *Jesus'* death and resurrection, we are promised more than what we can experience here on earth, more than what we can get for ourselves - we are promised life eternal with *God*.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/VQ3GxHxSYw8>

Service: <https://youtu.be/lh2D5UciYs8>