

Bearing One's Cross

Today's Gospel reading comes 6 days before the reading about the Transfiguration which we heard 2 weeks ago. This reading comes after Jesus gave the disciples a sort of mid-term exam. The first question was what others were saying about Jesus. For the second question, Jesus made it a lot more personal by asking who did they think Jesus was. Peter spoke up for the group by saying that Jesus is the Messiah. After telling them not to tell anyone His true identity, we pick up today's Gospel reading.

In today's Gospel reading we have the first time Jesus talks about the sufferings and death that He is facing. When this description doesn't fit in with the disciples' vision of the Messiah, Peter, thinking he knows the mind of God, tells Jesus that God would not allow it to happen. This is when Jesus reminds Peter of the difference between God's and humanity's expectations of the Messiah. Peter, representing the Jewish people, was expecting too little of the Messiah, whereas God was giving the people much more in a Messiah.

Today, I like to explore the second part of the reading, where Jesus talks about taking up one's cross in order to follow Him.

Remember that the cross was the most awful way to be put to death in the First Century. The Romans had perfected crucifixion and could vary the path to death. They could prolong death, making it last several days or make it quick. It was up to the executioner on how the person was hung on the cross, and thus how long they lived. The mode of death was by suffocation as the lungs filled with fluid as the body hung there. The person was usually stripped of all clothes and it was done where people could see the person. Regardless, when the Romans declared that a person was dead, they were certain of it.

So, when Jesus said that whoever wanted to follow Him had to take up their cross, this would have been the image that came to mind for the followers of Jesus. But I don't think Jesus was talking literally. After all, if He did mean this literally and we take it to its logical end, then this movement would not last for very long.

So, how can we understand this figuratively? First: 'Bearing one's cross' is not enduring the hardship of loneliness, illness, suffering, heartbreak, etc. as if we are supposed to find some sort of contentment in hardship. An example of what bearing one's cross is not is told by a pastor who was visiting an elderly lady who lived alone. She was not very friendly to her neighbors and the neighborhood kids would often ring her doorbell and then runaway before she came to the door. She mentioned to the pastor that this was her cross to bear in life. While there are the hardships of loneliness, illness, suffering, heartbreak and all that, we should not be looking to be engulfed by those hardships and use it as a proof of the kind of Christian we are.

How should we think of bearing one's cross? If we look to Jesus as the ultimate example of bearing one's cross, we would see that Jesus had set aside all personal desires, resisted temptation to take the easy way out and did the thing which God wanted Him to do - that is to take upon Himself the sins of others, accepting the punishment for those sins so that humanity could be saved. Jesus was 'called' by God to make that sacrifice that would redeem humanity and creation and make right the relationship between Creator and the created that was originally intended by God. Jesus looked outward to what others needed.

So, to follow Jesus' example of taking up one's cross, we see that Jesus did it for others, so that is what we must do. We are called to give ourselves up, stop looking inward for what we **desire** & look outward to see what others **need**, doing

whatever it is that *God* has called us to be and do: as a spouse, a parent, a farmer, a teacher, a doctor, a nurse, a grandparent, a student, a friend, an advocate, a police officer, etc. That same pastor also related his interaction with a widow when they were walking away from the graveside of her husband whom they had just buried. Knowing that the widow had also taken care of her mother throughout a lengthy illness and took care of her husband through his own lengthy illness, he mentioned that now perhaps she could take some time for herself and take a vacation and get away. She replied that she couldn't because her mother-in-law was ailing and she needed to help care for the mother-in-law. She trusted that *God* would give her the strength needed to continue to care for the ones she loved. This is what bearing one's cross is - looking to be of service to others, trusting that *God* will give you what is needed to meet your needs and the strength and gifts to give that service.

This part of *Mark's Gospel* account reflects a change in the *Gospel* and *Jesus'* mission. From here on, *Jesus* has set His face to *Jerusalem* where He faces the fate that He talks about. Up to now, we are told about who *Jesus* is through His actions, teachings and the people's reaction to Him. *Jesus* knows where this path takes Him, not just to the cross but also to the empty tomb. *Jesus* is confident that His journey will not end at the cross. We hear this assurance in today's *Psalm*, *Psalm 22*. This *Psalm* begins with the words, "My *God*, my *God*, why have you forsaken me?" words that *Jesus* spoke from the cross. Words that would have reminded people who were witnessing the crucifixion of this part of the *Psalm* which we heard today. Words of hope and assurance that *God* has not forsaken anyone, that *God* remembers everyone, even those in the deepest despair. That is what the people heard from the cross, that despite what appearances say, *God* is present and will not forsake *Jesus*. The story does not end at the cross.

So, when we hear the Passion of our Lord, let us not hear words of despair or lament from Jesus, but the assurance that the story does not end at the cross and that God is there and will be with us. Let us gladly pick up the cross to which we are called to carry, carry the burden of someone else, knowing that God is with us to give us what we need.

May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to follow Jesus to the cross and despite the cost of losing our lives, pick up the cross to which we are called to bear and look past that cross with our Savior on it to the time where God's Kingdom will reign supreme in heaven and earth.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/KF3J2hhAM3U>

Service: https://youtu.be/fQ_2EE4DGVU