

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 16:21–28. In this reading, we hear of how Peter turns quickly and easily from thinking as God does to thinking as men do. In doing so, Peter tries to deter Jesus from embracing His passion in Jerusalem. Peter’s statements of misguided faith and Jesus’ corrective responses to Peter are instructive to us in our discipleship as well.

Jesus teaches His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem where He will undergo His passion and death. In using the word “must”, Jesus is telling us that His passion is part of the Father’s plan (divine necessity). Peter could not understand how God’s plan could involve the suffering of the innocent, much less the death of the one whom he had just proclaimed to be the Christ. For Peter, such a statement was crazy, absurd, and even contrary to whom Peter thought God to be. Therefore, Peter tries to rebuke Jesus. The term “rebuke” is used primarily in the gospels to refer to the rebuking of evil spirits. If Peter doubted that Jesus’ passion could be part of God’s plan that means Peter thought our Lord’s passion and death must be part of Satan’s plan instead. Because of his mistaken understanding of the divine will, Peter actually wants to free Jesus of it! Jesus, in turn, reveals where Satan’s will is really being promoted, and it is in Peter’s mistaken efforts. Peter wanted Jesus to reject the experience of faithful suffering. Peter wanted to believe that following God’s divine plan should result in happiness, wealth, success, and many other blessings but not the cross. In all of this, Peter was tempting Jesus to fulfill the earthly expectations of the Messiah. Peter, who had been the “rock” on which Jesus proclaimed His Church would be built, has now become little more than a “stumbling stone” on the path of discipleship. Peter, who once spoke what was revealed to him by the heavenly Father, now speaks what comes from human reasoning and earthly desires. It is sobering to see how quickly and easily Peter can change from expressing correct faith (Mt 16:18) to misguided faith (Mt 16:22). Certainly the same can happen to us when we lose sight of the necessity of the cross in Jesus’ life and in the lives of all who would follow Him as His disciples. If we follow Jesus, we must accept the inevitable suffering that comes as a result of being a faithful Christian. Such moments of faithful suffering are not a sign of God’s abandonment of us or of the triumph of evil, but rather of our following where the Lord has already led. Sometimes we can let our own worldly understanding of success and happiness actually deter us from following Jesus when faithfulness involves sacrifice. The rebuke of Jesus is a lasting reminder to all of us that we should be very careful about allowing the thoughts of men to determine and guide how we receive and respond to the thoughts of God.

*How can the experience of suffering cause people to doubt the presence of God in their lives?
When have you felt that God’s will was calling you to embrace sacrifice and suffering as a
consequence of your fidelity?
What happens to a person’s faith when they think that following Jesus will bring them health,
wealth, success, and happiness each day?*

Jesus’ response to Peter’s rebuke is particularly instructive. When Jesus says, “Get behind me”, He is not telling Peter to go away but rather to assume once again the role of a disciple (a disciple is one who follows). When Peter faithfully follows Jesus’ lead, then he can be the foundation stone of the Church. But when Peter tries to be the one who leads Jesus, Peter stops being a disciple and becomes nothing but a stumbling stone. Jesus is pointing out to Peter what has gone astray in his faith; he is trying to lead God rather than follow God. Peter knows that a disciple will follow where the master goes, and Peter doesn’t like where Jesus is going because our Lord has indicated His destiny involves suffering and death. Jesus then goes on to teach Peter that being a Christian disciple isn’t just a matter of confessing the right faith.

Being a Christian disciple also means accepting and facing the challenges, suffering, and persecution that come to us because of our confession of faith. Peter was happy to confess Jesus as the “Christ, the Son of the Living God” but not happy to follow where the Christ was now leading him. Our confession of faith is a necessary proclamation of whom we believe Jesus to be. However, that confession means little if we do not live it out in committed, obedient, and practical aspects of our lives. For this reason, Jesus states in Matthew 16:27 that every person will be repaid based on what they have done as opposed to what they have said. Thus, our judgment will be based not on our words but on our deeds. This is a consistent theme in Matthew’s Gospel and challenges us to consider how well we are willing to embrace the cross with Jesus. Talk is cheap. Peter can profess the faith, but the more important question is whether he can carry the cross. That challenges all of us to ponder how well we live our Christian beliefs in practical daily life. Paul often taught the early Church about the necessity of living out their beliefs in daily life (Rom 14:12, 1 Cor 4:5, 2 Cor 5:10).

How do you see the temptation expressed today for people to separate what they believe from what they do?

What are situations in which you find it difficult to let your faith guide your actions?

How do people today try to lead God rather than follow God in their prayer?

What might Peter’s response to Jesus have been if he were speaking as a disciple rather than as someone who was trying to lead the Lord?

One last thing to point out about this passage is that the disciples only learn about the sacrifice required of them after they have been following Jesus for some time and are already well on their way to Jerusalem. It’s interesting that Jesus waits until this point in the Gospel to announce what awaits Him in Jerusalem and what following the Lord will really cost them as His disciples. That reality can be true for us as well. We don’t always know what the commitment of our baptism means until it gradually unfolds and deepens in lived discipleship over the course of time. All too often we only realize the challenges that faith will present once we’re well into the journey of Christian life. Such instances occur in the raising of a family or in taking a stand that opposes the culture of our time. Had the disciples known from the beginning that Jesus would lead them to the cross, many probably would not have followed the Lord. Jesus reveals the necessity of the cross as the way to true life. Indeed, those who willingly embrace the cross will find their life while those who avoid it at all costs will end up losing their lives. The disciples must have had a strong commitment to Jesus for them to continue as His disciples once they knew where the Lord was leading them. They are being presented to us as examples of perseverance to inspire and encourage us when we feel overwhelmed or burdened by the sacrifices of faith we face. Once we make a commitment to follow the Lord, we are giving God license to lead us where He wants to go and not to pursue our own destinations. Sometimes we only realize that God’s ways are not our ways as we grow in mature discipleship. This awareness can be, and is meant to be, an important step in our spiritual development that can lead us deeper in our commitment to Jesus by recognizing and rejecting our false and earthly desires.

Why do you think the disciples were so committed to Jesus that they followed Him even after they heard of the necessity of the cross?

When in your life have you made an irrevocable commitment to follow Jesus?

When has your Christian faith led you to make some very difficult choices or undertake difficult actions?

How have you experienced the life-giving reward of sacrificial love for others?

What does the expression, “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”, mean to you?

How do people today try to find their life by “saving it” rather than giving it away?

What is the greatest sacrifice you have made for God? What sacrifice do you fear most?