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# Lent Reflections for 2021

## Second Sunday of Lent. Year B

### Mark 8. 31-end

This morning, in our Gospel reading we hear the First Prophecy of the Passion in verses 31 to 33 where Jesus reveals to his disciples that He must be rejected by the religious authorities, condemned to death and killed, but that he would then rise again after three days. This marks a major turning point in Mark's Gospel and from now on our focus moves towards the passion, towards the suffering and death of the cross, but if we can journey there, we will also find the resurrection. However, this is all too much for Peter.

Just before this passage, in verses 27-30 Jesus asks Peter 'who am I?' and Peter declares, 'You are the Messiah.' For Peter and many of his contemporaries at the time, the idea of a suffering Messiah was a completely foreign concept. For Peter and many of the Jews at the time, the messianic figure was to be the one who would liberate Israel and re-establish the Davidic dynasty. It was unthinkable that God will allow Jesus' powerful ministry of preaching and teaching to be disrupted in this way. For Peter, the Messiah was there to conquer, not to die; even though this was in the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah. So, Peter responds and rebukes his master, but Jesus then issues his own rebuke. 'Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.'

Maybe, you might feel that Jesus responded rather harshly here, after all Jesus' sharpest reprimand in all the gospels is reserved for the one disciple that he had chosen to lead others. But let us have a closer look at this.

'Get behind me' expresses Jesus' rejection of Satan who was using Peter as a mouthpiece. In seeking to dissuade Jesus from the cross, Peter was making himself an opponent or an obstacle to the messianic mission. To do so was to play the role of Satan, tempting Jesus to be a messiah other than that willed by God.

'Get behind me' can also express Jesus' command to Peter to follow behind him as his disciple and not to presume to be the one who leads. It is Jesus' wish that Peter will at some point lead, Peter is the rock on which the Church shall be built, but in order to qualify to lead he must first be a follower of Jesus.

We can also look at Peter's rebuke of Jesus as a reaction based on fear and trepidation for what is to come, not only for Jesus but for himself and the other disciples. Surely if his master was to suffer a violent and horrific death then the followers of said master should expect to be in for equally brutal treatment? I don't know about you but if I was in Peter's shoes, I would certainly be worried about what was coming.

However, Jesus challenges this way of thinking and says Peter's mind, and maybe ours too, is focused on human concerns and that we do not have minds of God. The implication of this is massive because Jesus is telling us that mere human thinking is no longer enough and that we need to undergo a transformation of minds, one where we take on a new way of thinking, a divine way of thinking. According to human minds, defeat, humiliation and suffering make no sense and so neither does the passion. But God's thinking, or God's divine logic, leads us to understand the suffering of the cross as the path to victory. However, having divine logic will not make that path any less easy to tread and so we come to the next question, what is the true cost of discipleship?

In verse 34, Jesus says 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. Jesus sets this as a condition for discipleship, discipleship isn't merely being a passive follower who comes along for a good time. Rather it involves real work, real sacrifice and along the way, real pain. To deny ourselves and take up our own crosses sounds terrifying, but what Jesus is trying to tell us here is that to be a follower of His means more than turning up to Church on a Sunday, it means more than reading your Bible and praying daily.

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To be a disciple of Jesus means that we must follow him in suffering so that the Kingdom of God may be revealed to others.

Now let me be very clear, I am not saying that we must follow Christ in literally suffering a painful death, but our discipleship cannot be comfortable either. If it has become comfortable then something is wrong. Discipleship is costly, but we are not alone. Jesus says, 'take up your cross and follow me', we go where our leader is taking us; we are not alone.

However, it is worth remembering that for many Christians direct persecution and suffering was and is a reality. Under the reign of Emperor Nero, Christians had been burned, thrown to wild beasts and crucified. Still today Christians are persecuted:

- There have been stories of Christians being burned alive by Islamic State Terrorists in Iraq and Syria.
- There have been recent reports of genocidal attacks targeting Christians in northern Nigeria.
- In certain countries, Christians are targeted by the authorities purely because of their faith.

There are also more subtle forms of persecution, forms which we may have experienced or witnessed within our own countries, communities, parishes or maybe even within our own families. How often are Christians pressured into tailoring their words so as not to offend or to win approval? How often are we tempted to soft-pedal the Gospel in order to conform with a society? How often are we tempted into making Christianity something soft and comfortable, rather than radical and transformational? How often do we fail to truly love God and love our neighbour because it is difficult, inconvenient or might lead to some funny looks?

The Church has always placed tremendous importance on not merely believing privately in one's heart, but confessing one's faith publicly. To be a disciple of Christ is to stand up and be counted. Since the time of Christ tens of thousands of martyrs have born witness to the Gospel and to the message of God's love shown through the cross. Their witness was costly, the cost was their blood, but their witness has helped draw countless others to faith, inspired millions and shown to the world that the love of God in Christ can never be diminished. We may all not be called to that level of witness and sacrifice, but we are all called to stand up and be counted for the sake of the Gospel.

As we journey through Lent, let us pray for the grace to take up our cross and follow Him, the source of grace, redemption, and love. It won't be easy, and we might not know the exact implications of doing so...I certainly don't but then that is why faith is a journey, and remember we are not on this journey alone. The saints and martyrs are with us, the faithful company of heaven is with us, the Body of Christ which is the Church is with us and most importantly, Christ is with us.

Amen.

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