

## **22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Friends we must read the gospel for today in strict continuity with the gospel from last week: the story of the confession of Peter and the founding of the church. We hear that Jesus will build his new community on the rock foundation of Peter's confession: ***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*** And that this church, called out from the world, (ekklesia) will be a militant church because it is coming after the gates of hell. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. We are a church on the march trying to invade the sinful world with the power of God's grace.

Today we find the passage just following that. Jesus lays out the cost in no uncertain terms: ***From that time on Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.***

He will go, in other words, as the bearer of the divine love, as the Christ, to the capital of the nation and there he will be opposed, yes, even to the point of death—a hard message—but a true one.

Here's the premise: in a world gone wrong the divine love will typically meet with resistance. God's way is not typically accepted by the culture of death (to use St. John Paul's famous phrase). The world that is marked by violence, hatred, selfishness, moral relativism, rejection of faith and religion and a complete disregard for the sacredness human life—that world will not accept the intruding of the divine love but stands in opposition to it. It will try to block it and therefore Jesus knows that he is entering into battle—indeed, a battle unto death. And now the hinge of our passage today, Peter, this newly christened Rock foundation, refuses to accept this notion of our Lord: ***Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.*** Now here's a basic rule of thumb in N.T. interpretation: If you're telling Jesus what to do, you're in a bad spiritual place. Take that one to the bank. Remember Martha tells Jesus what to do, *tell my sister to help me.* Remember the mother of James and John: *make my two sons first and second in your kingdom.*

Well, when you are telling Jesus what to do, you are just ipso facto in a bad spiritual place. And so here, most dramatically, Peter himself treats the Lord as a kind of simple student who needs some elementary instruction.

There are a lot of people who love the Jesus of their imagination; who love the Jesus of their piety; perhaps even the Jesus of the culture, but are as uncomfortable as Peter is with the **real Jesus**. This is because the real one is always going to Jerusalem. The real one is always willing to lay down his life in the great struggle. Why? It is because He is the divine love incarnate in the world and that means He will meet with resistance. He knows this and is trying to communicate it now to that ekklesia, to that community that has been called out. If you are to be a bearer of that love, you too will suffer.

In one of the strongest and most startling lines in the N.T. Jesus says to Peter, who is trying to correct Him: **Get behind me Satan.** St. Peter, whom He had just praised as the rock, the foundation on which He would build his church, praised him for correctly seeing who Jesus is. And now He is calling him Satan. And says get behind me. Peter has become a stumbling stone. How ironic that the rock has become a stumbling stone and a spokesperson for the **father of lies**. What a strong thing to say! But Peter is speaking the **great lie** which is that the Christian life can be lived without the cross, without suffering love—and the fact of the matter is—it simply cannot!

And that is why by trying to talk Jesus out of the cross Peter is indeed speaking the language of Satan.

The second sense of "get behind me" beyond meaning get out of my way and do not be a stumbling block is stop telling me what to do and start following me. The right place for the Christian disciple to be is behind Jesus. This is especially so as He travels toward Jerusalem. We can see why this is so startling and so hard, and why we resist it as Peter did.

We would have no trouble with: get behind me as I march into fame; get behind me as I march into glory; or get behind me as the crowds cheer for me. **But** get behind me as I go to the place where I am going to be killed. It is in this we discover the true cost of discipleship.

Notice too that Jesus accuses Peter of thinking as human beings do and not as God does. How important this is. Human beings think in terms of self-protection, safety, avoidance of trouble—that's our primary frame of reference. But God thinks relentlessly in terms of love even or perhaps especially, if that love entails suffering.

This poses a good spiritual question for each of us. What is our final frame of reference? Is it: how do I avoid pain? Or is it: how do I love? How we answer will shape and determine everything else in our lives.

If our sole motivation is the avoidance of pain, then we will live selfishly. But if love is our sole motivation, then we will live the life of a saint. We will get behind Jesus. We will be members of the ekklesia, which is that community called out from the world. And this is why Jesus now says to His disciples: **Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**

Notice how active this language is. He doesn't say to His followers that they should accept the cross if it comes. No, He tells them **to take it up**—consciously, purposefully, lean into it. We must consciously and freely walk the path of suffering love if we are to be his followers.

Then we hear that wonderful and devastating line which has haunted the mind of anyone who has heard it over the centuries: **What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life...?** This means eternal life. Walking the

path of self-protection and self promotion can indeed gain you the whole world. But the price is way too high. For it involves compromising the person that God wants you to be; the compromising of your very soul.

My brothers and sisters, you are meant to be bearers of the divine love into the world, that's your mission, and it takes a million forms. This will always involve suffering because it means walking the path of self-denial. It means that the divine love will meet resistance. If you prioritize the avoidance of suffering you might gain the whole world but you will lose becoming the person God wants you to be. This is the heart of this gospel reading, it asks us to make a decision.

What path are you walking? Is it the path of self-protection or the path of self-emptying, self-forgetting love. Everything else will depend on how you answer this question.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella