

Homily for 24 (B) - 2018

“Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God’s way but man’s.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mark’s gospel, which is the gospel with which we are spending most time this year, is overwhelmingly concerned with telling us who Jesus is – that he is the Son of God, the Messiah. Today’s passage exemplifies this concern, telling the story of Peter’s confession of faith and moving on to spell out the details of Jesus’ Messianic destiny - to Peter’s confusion and discomfort.

Peter, indeed, becomes upset as Jesus tells of his suffering, death and resurrection, and, taking him aside, as you would with someone who has made an unfortunate mistake, remonstrates with the Lord. Jesus, in reply, says that his faithful follower is not thinking in God’s way, but man’s. And now something very important happens, so important that, Mark notes, “he called the people and disciples to him.” Clearly, what Jesus is about to say he intends everyone to hear. It is, in some way, absolutely solemn and fundamental. And this is what he says:

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.

In using the word cross, Jesus may or may not have had his own destiny in mind, but the plain meaning that would have been understood by those around him would have been a metaphorical one implying burden or hardship. The Lord is saying that the full burden of discipleship must be embraced, and that the way of a disciple was one for serious commitment. And then he says,

For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

This is the paradox which is at the heart of the message that Peter had trouble with. He has grasped that Jesus is the Christ, and he has been told, in Mark’s words

that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again.

One suspects that Peter, in his hasty way, hadn’t listened much past the words ‘suffer grievously’, and even if he had, Jesus’ revelation of the path that he was

to tread did not exactly fit into the business plan in Peter's head. The rebuke that he immediately received seems unkind, but, in truth, the Lord, as so often, goes to the root of Peter's problem – he is thinking in man's way and not God's. It is not until he follows the Lord to Jerusalem and experiences the events of the first Easter that he understands that there is some suffering that is salvific and that out of death comes resurrection.

Now, as we hear this story, the Church invites us to see ourselves as Peter and to ask if there are ways in which we prefer man's ways to God's. I think that the answer for all of us, will be, in some ways, yes we do. Even as we read the liberating words of scripture, even as we receive holy communion, even as we commune with the Lord in prayer, we are still infected by the viruses that society implants in us: sin and selfishness are very insistent influences on us, and, like Peter, we tend to complicate the straightforward task of taking up our crosses and following Jesus by retaining the perspectives of completely worldly people. Now, of course, we have to live in the world, indeed, we would not be able to transform it if we didn't live in the world, but in the battlefield of our hearts the world must not win. Let's be clear about this, we are not being told to seek suffering, and Christians have sometimes got this wrong, and we are not told to worship suffering: rather, we are taught to worship God, and to accept the suffering that comes with faithful discipleship, and that is a very different thing.

Let me be even more clear: our faith is not a destructive one in terms of our human condition. It is all about fulfilment and self-discovery. Christianity is not a gritted teeth sort of faith. There is great joy, there is pleasure, there is fellowship and there is freedom. We are invited to embrace a full humanity, not the parody of human existence that the world so often offers, but the humanity that it was the gracious pleasure of the Father to offer us in the beginning. Yes, we have to detox a bit, and that can be hard. We have to follow the Lord and accept the fact that there may be some points of discomfort or pain as we learn to be Christians. The world will mock us sometimes, and our refractory hearts and minds may have a bumpy ride as our souls attempt to drag them in the right direction, but those same hearts and minds know that there is only one way, the way that God has set for us, and that it is a way that leads not to death and suffering, but to resurrection and eternal life.