

## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Isaiah 50:5-9

Ps 114

James 2:14-18

Mark 8:27-35

I have to admit, I feel a bit sorry for Peter in our Gospel today. The poor man had just had his great success – he had correctly identified Jesus as the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. Then this signature moment is quickly followed by a massive misunderstanding and subsequent humiliation. Peter had realised that Jesus was the Christ, but he was stuck in a conventional understanding of what that might mean. And who can blame him?

Let's be honest – talking about *this* (point to the crucifix) is not exactly the most inspiring pep-speech that anyone has ever given. “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.” They must have thought, “Really? This is our long-awaited Messiah?”

It would be a bit like this. Imagine that your childhood dream was to play footy for your favourite team. And after years of patience and hard work you actually got pretty good, and that eventually you actually did make team! So now it's the last practice before the biggest game of your life, and towards the end Adam Simpson or Justin Longmuir addresses you all and says:

“Boys, the big one's coming up. You've been waiting for this your whole life. Here's what I want you to do. I want you to go out there... and lose! (*What?!*) I want you to get absolutely pummelled! What's more, I'm going to talk about this before the game and I'll be absolutely pummelled for it myself first. And the reason for this is that what you've always thought was winning is actually losing – and what you've always thought was losing is actually winning.”

Can you imagine if Adam Simpson or Justin Longmuir actually said that this weekend – and then announced it to the fans before the game? We'd want to crucify them ourselves – and that's just over a footy game!

So no wonder Peter—the “team captain”—felt he needed to pull Jesus aside and ask him what on earth was going on. Because what Jesus was saying made absolutely no sense. Poor old Peter simply had no way yet of knowing the supremely counter-intuitive power of the Cross.

As an aside, I should note that episodes like this are a powerful witness to the historical authenticity underlying the Gospel accounts – because the story of such an embarrassing misstep by Peter—the great leader of the early Church, and the first pope—would surely not have been included if it were not based a real event.

Now, this confrontation between Peter and the Lord Jesus is in some ways a snapshot of the currents at work throughout all of subsequent Christian history. On the one hand you've got conventional culture – on the other, the other-worldly power of the Cross.

When I started to understand this dynamic, it really helped me make sense of how upside-down so much of Western history has been over the years. Western culture is a fascinating and complex thing, but compared to many more traditional cultures it looks terribly upside-down in a lot of ways. And the reason for that is that we tried to build a culture upon this most counter-cultural person of Christ.

“The first will be last and the last will be first. If you want to save your life you must give it away. Blessed are the poor and the meek and those who mourn. It is harder for a rich man to enter eternal life than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The Son of Man must be handed over to death.” And we tried to base our culture on that?! No wonder it's so upside-down! Really, the last two-thousand years have been an ongoing arm-wrestle between conventional culture and the spirit of the Gospel, with various waxing and waning at different times.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the crucifixion. What looked like Jesus' most definitive failure, ended up being his greatest victory. But poor old Peter just could not conceive that *this* (point to the crucifix) is what winning might look like.

Let me offer just one dramatic example of the immense power of the cross, and how it sheds so much light on the stranger elements of our Christian history.

During the darkest period of the French Revolution—known as the “Reign of Terror”—the powers that be were engaged in a very conventional, if ruthless, political activity – consolidating power by executing those whom they perceived to stand in their way.

Monasteries and convents had been declared illegal by the revolutionary government, and thus all monks and nuns were seen as a threat to the state. In June of 1794, a small group of Carmelite sisters was arrested, and after they refused to give up their religious way of life, they were sent to the guillotine the following month. An angry mob had gathered for the public execution, but the shouting and insults soon gave way to a stunned silence as the sisters calmly sang the *Veni Creator Spiritus* (“Come Holy Spirit”) throughout their ordeal. This contrast between the logic of conventional culture and the other-worldly power of the cross had a profound effect on those who witnessed it. For it was clear that the peace—and even joy—of the Carmelite sisters as they were led to their deaths had no this-worldly explanation.

The subsequent impact on public sentiment was so significant that only eleven days later the leaders of the Revolutionary Tribunal were overthrown and the Reign of Terror was finally over. These humble sisters had managed to do what scores of

armed men had been unable to do. They gave up their lives, and in so doing gained eternal life – and profoundly altered world history.

The first will be last, and the last will be first. Death is the pathway to new life. Christ has turned human history upside-down. As things would have it, Peter himself would be turned upside-down – first by the tumultuous experience of betrayal and forgiveness during and after the Passion; then, he would be literally turned upside-down, as he followed his master by dying on a cross, turned upside-down at his own request out of humility.

We're often told that history is written by the winners. But God's ways are not our ways, and thank God for that. And though most of us will not be asked to imitate our Lord in such a dramatic way, all of us are called to make of our lives a self-offering, to die to ourselves in big and small ways for the sake of our own soul and for the sake of others. We are the disciples of a crucified and risen Lord – God almighty, and the Lord of history. Let us praise him with our lives, taking up our *own* cross, that we might also rise with him on the last day.