

## Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Isaiah 50:5-9

Psalm 114

James 2:14-18

Mark 8:27-35

Today's Gospel probably strikes us in its extremes. We hear Simon Peter making a beautiful proclamation of Jesus' true identity: that he is the Christ, the Promised One of Israel, the Messiah. But before too long we also hear Christ condemn him with the strong and fearful words: *Get behind me, Satan*.

How do we make sense of such a reversal? At one moment Peter is at his best – brave, honest, inspired. He confesses the truth about Jesus Christ, a truth for which Christ gives him a new name—“Peter”—the “Rock” upon which he will build his Church. But the moment that Jesus begins to teach him about his suffering and death, Peter stumbles, and falls from grace.

Again, I think that Peter is perhaps the most relatable person in the Gospels, because we so often act in a similar way to him. We can be on fire for God in one moment, then finding ourselves discouraged, confused, and angry in the next. When things are going well, we may say, “Praise God!” But when a challenge comes our way, we can often despair or even rebel.

In Peter's case, the challenge was his own expectation of what the Christ would be. He expected a Messiah who would conquer his enemies – not someone who would give himself over to the authorities to be executed. He had no comprehension of how the Cross could possibly be part of God's plan.

Perhaps the truth is that we, too, want an all-conquering Christ. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God exists solely in order to bless us – like a child who thinks that the only reason that his parents exist is to provide him what he wants. But following the Lord is not simply a case of praying to a god who grants all our desires, like some cosmic vending machine. No, following Christ means allowing our desires to be *transformed and changed* – or to put it more plainly, allowing our desires to be put to death, to the degree that they conflict with God's will for our lives. Christ himself is our model in this, and he places this call in our mouth every time we pray the prayer he gave us: “Thy Kingdom come, *Thy will be done!*”

And just as we often echo Peter in struggling to make sense of a Christ who operates on a plane far above our hopes and expectations, so too we can struggle to make sense of the Church he founded.

Much of our experience of the Church is likely different from what we would have expected. Obviously there is the horror of the abuse scandals of recent years. Such

sickening behaviour that has caused so many innocent victims, which you and I have had nothing to do with, but which we all get tarnished with by association.

Then there are the scandals of division within the Body—theological, liturgical, etc.—which often reveal us as being not sufficiently separated from the divided house that our public square has become.

Then there is the harassment, or sometimes outright persecution, that the Church is subject to in certain parts of the world. Attacks on Christ's body that echo the attacks that Christ himself was subject to.

In the face of all this, our inner-Peter probably wants to remonstrate with Christ once more: "Why, Lord? How can you let your Church suffer like this? How can you let us suffer? What have we done wrong?"

The answer to such questions is likely the same as to why Christ himself had to suffer. There *is* no good reason. The vast majority of us, priests and laypeople alike, have contributed nothing to the scandals, and have done our best to be faithful disciples, despite our various personal shortcomings. We don't deserve the struggles that have befallen the Church, or which we face in our own lives.

But this is *still* the voice of Peter talking. It is the inner voice that cries out and resists the Cross that Christ promised we would encounter, a voice that rejects suffering because it cannot see any purpose to it... because it does not fully trust that the Lord can save and redeem us.

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Pope Saint John Paul II, during his visit to Perth back in 1986, at one point visited the aged care facility run by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Glendalough. And while he was there, he famously said to some of the residents, "Don't waste your suffering." Don't waste your suffering! On the surface that seems such a strange or even insensitive thing to say to those enduring various physical or mental trials (though of course we know that John Paul II would endure many such trials himself). But the point is not that we should seek out such trials in some kind of self-loathing fashion, but simply that when such trials come (and they invariably do for each of us), they need not be meaningless.

The saving mystery at the heart of our faith reveals that God can take the Cross and transform it into the Resurrection. He can take our suffering and use it for his life-giving purposes. While not caused by God, suffering is sometimes allowed by him as a result of the freedom he has given us, and yet it need not be seen as random or meaningless. Sorrow does not have the final say. Suffering can be redemptive, because our Lord can bring good even out of evil.

Merely human wisdom is not capable of understanding such things. Speaking of the crucified Christ, Saint Paul said that “to the Jews it is an obstacle that they cannot get over, and to the pagans it is madness.”

The world will always try to sell us something cheaper than what the Lord chose for himself and what he asks us to choose as well... namely, true love. And true love is a *sacrificial* love... a love that allows itself to suffer, and yes, even to die – because it knows that the story does not end there. It knows that real love is not conquered by the tomb.

Christ himself demonstrates this love for us and shows us the way. And as difficult as it can be at times, we are all called to follow this path—both individually and as a Church—because now and in every age, we have been called to enter into a *mystery*. It is a mystery that we proclaim in word and deed every time we gather and do what Christ asked us to do in his memory. We call it the “Paschal Mystery”: the passion, death, and resurrection of our God.

If we remain in mindset that Peter displayed in our Gospel passage, we can never understand what the Lord is asking us to do. He is asking us to move beyond our worldly expectations of success. He is asking us to allow him to lead us and guide us. His way is not always easy. He didn’t tell us that it would be. But our consolation is that the battle is already won. Christ has risen, and his Church will rise again as well, as he has promised.

And with that promise in mind, we can ask ourselves: will we be willing to take up our cross when necessary and follow him, or will we rebuke him for suggesting that we, too, must follow this path? Will the Resurrection that Christ promises his Church happen *in spite* of us, or will it happen *because* of us?

In our second reading, Saint James emphasises that our life as a Christian—our relationship with God—is not a passive experience. Being Christian does not mean giving up our responsibilities and just sitting back with the attitude that “God will take care of everything.” Sometimes, matters are truly out of our control, in which case we can only be patient. But so often, there is something we are called to do. So often, God desires us to be his hands and feet in the world, and our faith demands this, because faith without works is dead.

In the face of our trials, may we look to the Eucharist to be our strength now more than ever. In every Mass, the Paschal Mystery is renewed. Upon this altar, Christ suffers and dies for us and invites us to take part in that same mystery. Against all worldly wisdom, we come forward to partake in that death with joy and gratitude – because we know that we are storing up for ourselves a share in what follows: the glory of the Resurrection.

“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.”

