

Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2021

Year B RCL

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Mark 8:31-38

“Deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

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The Lenten journey confronts us today with the Christian paradox of self-denial and losing one's own life to gain eternal life. This important component of the Christian faith demonstrates how counter cultural the message of the gospel is, and how sacrifice and worldly loss produces new life. This is the major reason of why Christianity is more than a ritual and requires from each person total adherence and commitment.

This ethical invitation of self-denial and sacrifice by the example of Jesus is grounded out of the love and obedience he has to the Father. He humbles and lowers himself taking the nature of a servant (Philippians 2:6-11). We find the core of our faith in the cross of Jesus, and the entire Bible points in that

direction as the way of salvation. Only when we die to ourselves is it possible to produce fruits to share with others. “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

Today’s gospel does not need much interpretation or special studies. It is clear, “Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.”

There is not any secret or code language in the revelation of the future events. Even if the disciples do not know that they are following Jesus who goes to Golgotha to die. Jesus is telling them “quite openly” all that will happen, but the disciples seem oblivious and unaware of what to do with this disturbing information.

In this same sense, this could happen for us modern Christians when we read or hear this gospel, we have the advantage of knowing the end of the story and thus imagine we have enough understanding as Christians to see what comes next. Without seeming pessimistic, the reality instead is that the only

certainties in our life is the love of God and our own physical death which we do not have control over. We should however prepare for our own death now by taking the call to conversion as a serious invitation where we constantly measure and evaluate our own present.

As we sadly remember the 500,000 lives lost in the U.S.A. to the COVID-19 pandemic, we can imagine that for many of them their death unfortunately arrived unexpectedly and without the appropriate preparation. The liturgy during this time in Lent is proper to remind us of our own humanity and fragility, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). The fragility and weakness make sense when we read it in Christian perspective from the cross. The life of Jesus he lived to the fullness, and his own sacrifice is the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of Israel.

To live as true Christians, the cross needs to be at the center of our lives; it is not simply a religious object, but the vital instrument of God's salvation for us today and all time. When Jesus expressed openly his passion, Peter in this same chapter (verse 29) has declared Jesus as the Messiah, however with a different idea of the passion. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."

Peter's messiah is a political one, someone with power that instead of dying for others causes the death of others. Peter's expectations are so human and far from God that his messiah is a different person than who Jesus is.

"Get behind me, Satan!" is to say, move away tempter. Jesus who had invited Peter to follow him (Mark 1:17) is forced now to confront Peter's idea of messianism. Peter wants to follow Jesus according to his own idea of religion and on his own terms. This happens to believers of all times, making conditions to God, giving him our limited time or minimal resources although he gives us everything, including his life. "Adulterous and sinful generation" is how Jesus calls them in today's gospel. These believers are like Peter's messiah, putting their minds on human things.

Jesus calling all the disciples, makes again quite openly his statement about the discipleship path, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The way of self-denial is a life of service far from being self-inflicted pain and empty suffering. Carrying the cross that Jesus requires means to die constantly to our own self to allow love to produce fruits. The humble service to others in silence characterizes and distinguishes those who are really carrying the cross and following Jesus.

When we contemplate around us the modern expressions of Christianity, it is possible to easily discover that many are occasional followers or uncommitted believers. As you reflect and learn from Jesus in the journey to Calvary, never forget that the call to grow in faithfulness in your own discipleship is the participation of how the cross of Jesus is present today for you, and through you for others. Amen.