

*It's no secret*

The Second Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Fr. Patrick Raymond

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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Mark 8:31-38

In a number of scenes in the gospel of Mark, Jesus silences, or attempts to silence, those with reason to proclaim his power as a healer, or his authority a teacher, or even his divine nature. Collectively, these incidents in Mark have been called the Messianic Secret.

We saw an instance three weeks ago from the first chapter of Mark. On the same evening that Jesus healed the mother-in-law of Simon and Andrew, he also cast out many demons, "... and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him ..." (1:34b) Two weeks ago, we witnessed Christ's Transfiguration, after which Jesus ordered those who saw it firsthand '... to tell no one about what they had seen, until after [he] had ... risen from the dead.' (9:9) In the passage just prior to today's text, when Peter declares on behalf of the twelve that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus "... sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." (8:30)

Knowing of this Messianic Secret, we may wonder why it is, in the passage we just heard, that "*Jesus said these things quite openly.*" This teaching is not to be kept secret.

What Jesus wants to get out into the open here is the nature of his Messianic identity and mission. He is beginning to show for the first time that he is and will be the Messiah by virtue of his death on a cross. First will come betrayal, injustice and pain, but the gruesomeness of his death won't qualify him as the Messiah. Rather, it will be his willing sacrifice, understood as the sacrifice of a self-giving God. Listen for it in the canon of the mass that we will soon pray, proclaiming the Messiah's death on the cross as "*a full perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.*"

We Christians may spend a lifetime more perfectly comprehending the nature and meaning of this sacrifice of Christ on the cross. If we take the quest seriously, we will inevitably come across the word atonement. And we will learn that theologians have contemplated and debated competing atonement theories for centuries. I may be passing the buck here, but I'm so grateful that young Noah Riegenbach will sort some of this out for us in our final Lenten program, on March 28.

For now, consider how the English word atonement can be separated by syllable and pronounced as AT - ONE - MENT. We humans repeatedly fail in our efforts to attain, restore or enjoy the oneness with God, self and others that God so desires. Our allegiances are constantly being broken, compromised and divided. For remedy, for salvation – for AT - ONE – MENT – we Christians name and rely on the cross.

Notice that in today's gospel passage, Jesus does not give a sophisticated theology of sacrifice and atonement. Instead, he turns attention away from himself. He does so to implicate all of us: *"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."*

Here and in what follows through the end of this teaching of Jesus, you and I come to a place of reckoning. Books and theories can only take us so far. When all is said and done, taking up a cross is a hands-on matter. You and I may be most likely to follow Jesus as he means it here when we specifically see, in the measurable relationships and circumstances of our lives, a cross that comes into view. And if we pick it up and carry it, we will most likely do so because we have seen other followers of Jesus faithfully doing so.

Bishop Doug Sparks illustrated this for those of us at yesterday's ordinations for our diocese. He told us of Della, whose employment for years had been manual labor in the basement laundry of the public hospital in St. Louis. Della also showed up ten times a month to commandeer the sink in the kitchen of a downtown church where the poor and homeless were fed. Della could be cranky with her standards. She didn't want the dishes to be any less spotlessly clean just because they were being used to serve those who, in the world's eyes, were desperate and powerless.

Bishop Sparks meant the story of Della for the three deacons ordained yesterday (as George Arceneaux was being ordained priest). The bishop urged the deacons to identify, to get to know, and to follow the examples of, the Dellas in their parishes and neighborhoods – those who carry a cross of compassion and reconciliation to the people for whom the sacrificial love and fierce justice of God is most needed in our world, in God's world.

Bishop Sparks' charge reaches beyond those who are deacons to all of us who say that we follow Jesus. Important and distinctive as a deacon's ministry may be, it is also meant to be emblematic of the way of the cross that all who are baptized are called to walk. Listen for it, in a few moments, in one of the first lines of today's mass, as we are reminded of, and affirm our call, *"to live no longer unto ourselves, but unto him who died for us and rose again."* (The Rite I Preface for Lent, p. 346) To keep this call before us throughout Lent and beyond, we may wish to carry with us the question, *"What would Della do?"* And, then, *"What will I do? How will I be and become a living sacrifice, and emblem of Christ's AT - ONE – MENT – to those in my household, to my neighbors, to the world?"*

The so-called Messianic Secret is a curious feature of the Gospel of Mark. But Jesus made no secret of his coming Passion, death and sacrifice. You and I are to make no secret of the Messiah whom we follow. The secret comes out into the open when others see us following our Messiah – openly, willingly carrying a cross. *Amen.*