



Twenty fourth Sunday Ordinary Time 2006

Isaiah 50: 5-9 James 2:14-18 Mark: 27-35

The gospel of today begins the second half of Mark's account concerning Jesus, Messiah, Son of God. This is also the writer's subtitle to the Gospel.

It appears that the author was concerned about the confusion that disciples experienced in the following of the Way. The disciples had experienced the saving action of God in their lives and had responded to the in-breaking of what they would understand as kingdom.

The disciples had also experienced empowerment to act in Jesus' name. They had preached the gospel, they had healed and taught. So why were there problems? What had they misunderstood?

All the indications of the "day of salvation" have suggested glory. The new age that was heralded by Jesus is a time of triumph. The prophets spoke in glowing terms about renewal and restoration. The disciples expected to be caught up in this glory. They had forgotten that their leader had been crucified not crowned in Jerusalem.

To be an authentic disciple is to reflect on the whole story. To this end Mark tells the story concerning Jesus so that his life and glory are seen in the context of his suffering and death.

The second half of the Gospel begins with the great question. The account says that, "On the way..." Jesus posed the question. The following of Jesus can begin anywhere and for a variety of motives but sometime "along the way" the disciple must pause and consider the big question.

Who do you say I am?"

Our answer to this question will help us to discern where we stand. Jesus followed Peter's enthusiastic answer with a teaching about suffering. Suffering, rejection and death all precede resurrection. To try and dodge the suffering inherent in the human situation is to toy with the temptation to manipulate God.

Life calls us to take up the Cross, not trip over it and curse it. In some spiritualities of the past there was a false understanding of this saying. People thought that manufacturing suffering, through harsh treatment of the body, was a way to identify with Jesus. Such fanatical behaviour is as wrongheaded as is the denial of suffering.

In other readings put before us today is one of the great poems of Isaiah on the theme of suffering. The servant of God is described in clear unambiguous terms. God gifts the disciple with a well-trained tongue. This is not an orator's tongue, capable of delivering prize-winning speeches, but a tongue with a specific gift.

The gift is the ability to rouse the weary from despair, the ability to bring comfort and compassion to the suffering. We know this response to the pain of the other does not even require words but is an attitude of the heart.

The right heart comes from attention to the word of God. Morning after morning God gives us the ability to pay attention. This is another way of saying that God gives us the virtue of obedience, faithful listening.

Dedication to *the Way* will have its own costs. Misunderstanding comes even from our own people. The next part of the poem describes the pain that the disciple feels when he or she is the bull of the painful ridicule of others.

If we have the courage of our convictions then we will not fear what is said against us. See, God is our help! This is the prayer of a holy person with a lot of experience in the following of the Way. It can help us be faithful when setbacks push us into negativity.

James reminds us that a faith not practised is dead. He uses the example of reading the quality of faith in the good works it gives rise to. Suffering is not virtuous. Growing through suffering which teaches us compassion towards others is a blessing.

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