

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Gal 6:14

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mark 8:27-35; L131B

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

Along the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

They said in reply,

"John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets."

And he asked them,

"But who do you say that I am?"

Peter said to him in reply,

"You are the Christ."

Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He began to teach them

that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.

He spoke this openly.

Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples,

rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan.

You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them,

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,

but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it."

Reflecting on the Gospel

There is a story of the US civil rights era where one person told another how much he admired Martin Luther King Jr. The second person responded that there was a group who was going to march with Dr. King. If he was an admirer, would he like to join them in the march? "No," the first person said. "I could get hurt doing that. I'm an admirer, not a follower."

Jesus tells the crowds and his disciples that to be one of his followers one must be ready to "take up his cross, and follow me." Jesus does not need admirers. But he does want followers. And those

followers might get hurt. In fact, they are told to take up their cross. The Christian life is not likened to a recliner, but a cross. As founder and leader of this movement, Jesus foretells his

own suffering and death. This is met with incredulity

on Peter's part so much so that he rebukes Jesus! True to form, Peter's rebuking of Jesus comes on the heels of his confession that Jesus is the Christ. It seems Peter misunderstood the implication of his own confession. This should be a warning for us too who confess Jesus as Christ, Lord, or any other title we choose. Our own understanding of who Jesus is, and what he is to do, may not conform to the reality of who Jesus is, and what he is to do. Though Peter had been one of the first disciples called by Jesus, and had witnessed his ministry up to this point, he still misunderstood.

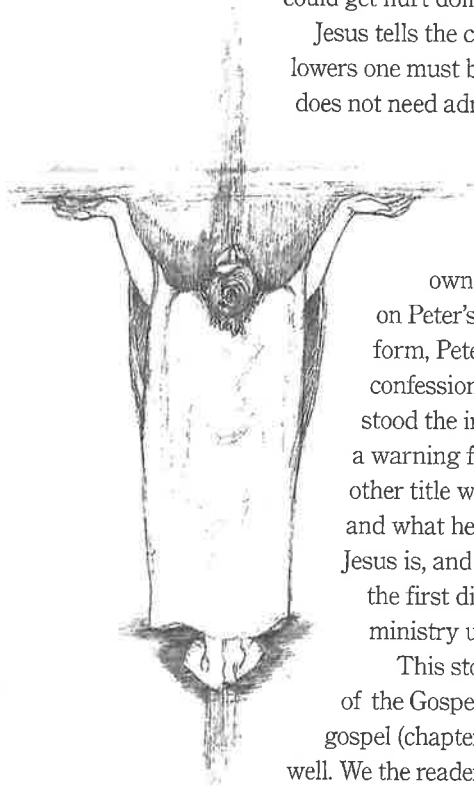
This story of "Peter's confession" forms the centerpiece of the Gospel of Mark. Not only is it in the literal center of the gospel (chapter 8 of 16 chapters) but it is the narrative center as well.

We the readers learned in Mark 1:1 that this is the gospel of Jesus *Christ*, the Son of God. Now in chapter 8, for the first time in the gospel, a human being (Peter) recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Christ. Not until the death of Jesus will another human being (the centurion) recognize Jesus as Son of God, the second title of Jesus from Mark 1:1. This becomes a literary way of expressing Jesus' identity. He is Christ, and he will suffer and die. Only after doing so can he be fully understood as Son of God.

Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, does it say that the Messiah would die, much less even suffer. This is likely why Peter rebukes Jesus after Jesus says he will suffer and die. Peter thinks Jesus has it all wrong: the Christ is not going to suffer, but will rule triumphantly. Jesus, however, knows otherwise. Jesus can only be the Christ, the Son of God, by suffering and dying on the cross. His disciples are called not to be mere admirers, but to take up their crosses and follow him.

Living the Paschal Mystery

It's so much more convenient and easy to be an admirer of Jesus rather than a follower. But Jesus is not calling admirers. He wants those who will take up their own cross in following him. Our crosses will be those burdens we carry by doing justice, as Jesus did. We will bear our crosses when we tend to the sick, shelter the homeless, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirst and more. In classical Catholic terms, we refer to these as the corporal works of mercy. Performing these acts of mercy takes us outside of ourselves. It places others' needs ahead of our own. We die to self so that others might live.



Following Jesus is not about convenience, easy living, or mere admiration. We only need to see the image of the cross to be reminded of that. As Jesus had his cross, we have ours. To be his disciples, we are to take it up and carry it.

Focusing the Gospel

Mark 8:27-35

In today's gospel, Peter is a model of vacillating faith—a model that typifies our own reaction to the call to discipleship.

Caesarea Philippi was a bazaar of worship places and temples, with altars erected to every concept of divinity from the gods of Greece to the godhead of Caesar. Amid this marketplace of gods, Jesus asks the Twelve, "Who do people say that I am? . . . who do *you* say that I am?" This is a turning point in Mark's gospel: Peter responds, on behalf of the Twelve (?), by saying that Jesus is the Messiah. Now for the first time in Mark's gospel, Jesus speaks about dark things ahead of him: rejection, suffering, death, and ultimate resurrection (concepts that the disciples are unable to grasp).

To the question Jesus poses (a moment recorded in all three Synoptics), Peter immediately confesses his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the long-awaited Anointed One of God. But when Jesus begins to speak as one who will suffer rejection and death, Peter immediately objects. Peter's reaction is in keeping with what was the accepted notion of the time of a messiah who would restore the ancient Davidic kingdom's political and economic fortunes. Jesus' rebuke of Peter challenges that image of the Christ as a human construct, not that of God.

Focusing the First Reading

Isa 50:4c-9a

Today's first reading is taken from the third Servant Song of the prophet Isaiah (a portion of this passage is read every year on Palm Sunday). Isaiah portrays God's servant as one who will be insulted, abused, and rejected for the word God has called him to proclaim. The prophet himself seems to have seen this figure as Israel personified (Isa 49:3); Christians see this as a prophecy that is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9 (9)

When a faithful Jew was saved from illness or catastrophe, he would come to the temple to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord for his deliverance. The first half of Psalm 116 is the song of such thanksgiving. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term translated here as *gracious* is used only for the Lord, describing God's constant and limitless protection and help to the humble and just.

Focusing the Second Reading

Jas 2:14-18

Today's reading from James's letter is the heart of the epistle: the relationship of faith to good works. Faith that is alive naturally manifests itself in action. Dead faith produces no good works, inspires no loving response to the Word we have heard, and possesses no power to save. It is not faith at all. It is dead. Living faith, however, rejoices in God's word and celebrates that presence in acts of compassion and reconciliation.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

In what ways can we "crucify" our own interests for the sake of others?

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How do our actions sometimes give conflicting answers to Jesus' question in today's gospel: "Who do you say that I am?"

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In whom have you seen the face of the crucified Christ?

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What is the most difficult and challenging cross that you carry? Has it ever been a means of resurrection in your life?

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Has "knowing" Jesus ever posed a serious challenge to you?

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