

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

See Eph 1:17-18

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our hearts, that we may know what is the hope that belongs to our call.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Matt 16:21-27; L124A

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you."

He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "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 will find it.

What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Or what can one give in exchange for his life?

For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay all according to his conduct."



Reflecting on the Gospel

This Sunday's gospel reading from Matthew immediately follows last week's, which is not always the case in the Lectionary. In other words, the episode about Jesus rebuking Peter today comes immediately after the story of Peter proclaiming Jesus the Christ and Jesus in turn saying he will build his church upon this "rock." In some ways, this is a good reminder of the unintended life of discipleship when we can experience extreme highs one moment and fall into such depths the next. For all Peter's exuberance in proclaiming Jesus the Christ, it is only a few verses later that Jesus is rebuking him for thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.

And what precisely is the cause of the rebuke? How is Peter thinking as human beings do? It's because Peter does not comprehend or understand the necessity of suffering and how it is a constitutive element of Jesus' identity as Messiah. Though the Old Testament does not say it, Jesus certainly does. The Messiah will suffer and die. Peter, informed by the Scriptures, has good justification for telling Jesus that he has it all wrong. When Peter proclaimed Jesus Messiah, he did not have in mind suffering and death, but triumph and jubilation. This is the source of the misunderstanding. But Jesus, ever the teacher, takes the time to explain how and why Peter has it wrong. Jesus will encounter opposition that will lead to his death. The same can be said for the disciples.

As the meaning of discipleship becomes more clear, we can wonder how Jesus had any remaining disciples! If the cost of discipleship is one's very life, perhaps it's better not to be a disciple? In the gospels it's clear that "would-be disciples" do in fact leave Jesus—they cease to follow him. But Peter and the others maintain their relationship with him, allowing it to go deeper, into a more full and complete understanding. By seeking to save one's life, it will be lost. By giving away one's life, it will be saved. To be the reigning, victorious Messiah means a life that ends in suffering and death. The paradoxical notions of Jesus' teaching are central to his wisdom.

Living the Paschal Mystery

The paradoxical sayings of Jesus are on full display today, following Peter's proclamation of him as Messiah. The paradoxes come to the fore because of Peter's misunderstanding of what it means to be the Messiah. Rather than victory and a glorious reign (which apparently is what Peter had in mind), Jesus rebukes him to say that his Messiahship will lead to his death. Only then will he be raised.

As disciples, we are to take on the mind of God, to think not as human beings do. Our human priorities are often misplaced, focused on temporal well-being and the accolades of our peers. Instead, Jesus reminds Peter (and us) that God is one's true audience. Our ways of thinking need to be inverted, or even turned inside out. When we think as God does, we will know that loss means finding, denial of oneself is ultimate fulfillment, and death leads to life. To think in these ways requires extra effort because it does not come naturally. But once we do think as God does, we are on our way to living the paschal mystery.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: Jesus began to show his disciples / that he must suffer greatly . . . and be killed and on the third day be raised.

To the point: When Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting his passion, it's almost as if he stopped listening after hearing Jesus reveal that he would suffer and die. It is normal to protest when thinking of a loved one going through pain and even death. But Jesus' prediction doesn't stop with pain and death; he goes on to say he will also be raised. Jesus' response to Peter is to exclaim, "Get behind me, Satan!" Earlier in Matthew's gospel when tempted in the desert, Jesus refuses to give in to the devil's suggestions that he turn rock into bread, test God's love for him, or bow down in worship in return for power and authority. At the end he yells, "Get away, Satan!" (4:10; NABRE). As a human being, Jesus can be tempted, though as God he does not give in to temptation. In Peter's protest that "[n]o such thing shall happen to you," he is tempting Jesus to turn away from the cross. But Jesus knows that the only way to risen life is through death.

Connecting the Gospel

to the second reading: St. Paul's words to the Romans today also have a paschal bent. He urges them to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, / holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship." Scholars believe this letter was written between AD 56 and 58. At this time the temple in Jerusalem still stood where sacrificial worship was enacted. For Christians, Jesus' death upon the cross took away the need for sacrifice, for "we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb 10:10). Instead of animal sacrifice, Paul proposes that the Romans offer their bodies as a living sacrifice. This doesn't mean that they can only please God through a martyr's death but that everything they do, every moment of their lives, can be an act of love for God.

to experience: How do you offer your life up to God as an act of worship?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: The question could be asked, if this is the way of God that suffering, struggle, and ultimately death are all a part of the package, what has kept Jews and Christians faithful throughout the ages? Today's psalm refrain seems to hold an answer: "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God." Just as we need water to live, our longing for God is innate and undeniable. We may try to satisfy the thirst in our souls with many other things, but ultimately true peace is only found in our Creator.

to psalmist preparation: How do you experience the thirst for God in your life?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

Jeremiah says his call to prophesy is like "fire burning in my heart." What work has God called you to that sparks this kind of passion?

The psalmist proclaims to God, "You are my help . . . My soul clings fast to you." Where are you most in need of God's assistance right now in your life?

St. Paul invites the Romans to "discern what is the will of God, / what is good and pleasing and perfect." How do you practice discernment in your life when faced with a big decision?

In the gospel Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, / take up his cross, and follow me." What is the cross you have been given to bear?