

Jeremiah 15: 15-21
Psalm 26
Romans 12: 1-8
Matthew 16: 21-27
[Proper 17]

To really get hold of the significance of today's gospel reading with its talk of the cross and of suffering and dying and being raised we need to quickly look back to last week's gospel.

Jesus had led his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi, and there he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" You remember that right?

They told him what? - "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Then came the big question - Jesus knew the way the people thought and could understand their confusion but what about those closes to him, that is you and me, so he asked - "Who do you say I am?"

And Peter answers "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Inspiration from God - Jesus answers Peter's response How?

Peter was truly blessed - that this answer has been revealed to him by God the Father. Then Jesus says to Peter that on Peter, Jesus would build his church - an everlasting church - and to him he would give "the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Jesus then charged His disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Now answer me this please - was Jesus really saying that Peter would be the cornerstone of the church OR would the people like Peter - those inspired by God - on which he would build his church????

Just moments after this event we have today's reading pickup and I ask you - where was the inspiration of God in Peter now - when we hear these words;

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

I had a word spring out at me in my reading of this verse that had, up to this point been just another adjective in the script - I am sure that you have been aware of this word. I am a little slow on the up take sometimes. This word is repeated twice in this single verse, I think that maybe this was the word that caught Peter's attention and stimulated his response - the word caused Peter to take Jesus aside and prompted his rebuke of Jesus;
"Never Lord! This shall never happen to you."

I refer to the adjective "must".

I must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things.
I must be killed - and on the third day be raised to life.

Can we understand where Peter was regarding such a statement?

Many of us, if we had been with Jesus, would have felt the same way, no Lord no one will harm you on my watch - I will protect you. How many of you feel today as Peter felt then about your church - your belief in God. Are you prepared to defend the word of God?

It made no sense to Peter that the Messiah, the Son of The Living God, must suffer and die.

It makes no sense to him that the King over Israel, the one promised of old That would arise from the line of David, to rule over David's kingdom, must suffer many things at the hands of the very people who should welcome him with open arms.

It makes no sense at all that a dear friend - a holy man - a righteous man - a man destined to rule God's own people should be speaking of defeat instead of victory - of disgrace instead of honor - of an early death instead of a glorious and long life - and He says that it MUST be so.

If we take a few moments and look back to the Old Testament, what did it have to say about this??? I went back to the prophet Isaiah and found;

Isaiah 53:2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Isaiah 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Peter had heard these prophecies from Isaiah in the temple halls but, Peter, like so many of us would have been, he was caught up in the moment. He was not recalling what he had been taught in temple from the prophets, he simply doesn't hear and maybe all of us are not hearing what Jesus is saying - BUT what he does hear - he doesn't want to accept and is prepared not to let it happen.

Now after his revelation from God and Jesus telling him than his church shall be built on Peter - Jesus condemns his lack of hearing - his lack of accepting - his lack of understanding by saying to Peter:

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

From hero to heel in just seconds.

Then Jesus tells all the disciples, who have been listening to this exchange between Peter and Jesus:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself (there is that word again) and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever

loses his life for me will find it...".

Have you ever wondered why throughout the gospels Jesus rebukes demons who identify him as the Son of Man and warns his disciples not to tell others that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living of God?

Maybe like you, when I first started reading the Bible it struck me as very strange.

I mean is not our whole faith based on the understanding that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh?

- that he is the promised shoot arising out of the stump of Jesse?
- that he is the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and to Moses, to David and to Jeremiah and to Isaiah & Jacob and to all the prophets?

Indeed, isn't it the job of the Holy Spirit to reveal this very thing to us, much as Jesus says to Peter at Caesarea Philippi that he is blessed because the Father has revealed it to him?

"Jesus - You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"
Why can't we say it?? Why can't we tell the whole world - right now - today?"

Well, of course, we can. But at the very beginning the disciples were told not to tell anyone.

And the reason for that is because the people of the time, the faithful people, the hopeful people, who awaited the Messiah, would, upon hearing the news, would fail - much as Peter failed - to hear the message of the Messiah. Because the whole tapestry of His life had not been revealed. We state it each and every week we are in this church in the proclamation of our faith when we say:

Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ will come again

The message concerning his life

- I must suffer.
- I must be killed and on the third day rise.

And the message about their lives

- If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
- For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

I ask you - are we like that as a church??

Are we failing to hear what the Messiah is all about, and what the Messiah, the Christ expects, indeed demands, of his followers.

Are we becoming like some of our kindred spirits down the road that pick and chose what they want And let the rest go by the wayside?

- That proclaim forgiveness without requiring repentance,
- where baptism is practiced without requiring that one be a part of the body of Christ,
- where communion is offered without the need for confession and reconciliation

- where wealth and health is promised if you just believe rather than the service and sacrifice, the humility and the self-giving that is the sign of our calling, and indeed the sign of sainthood.

One of my seminarian instructors told us:

- "Jesus promised his disciples three things
- they would be entirely fearless,
- absurdly happy,
- and always in trouble."

That's not the kind of message most people want to hear and yet very true.

Troubles we already have.

What we want is a world without trouble -
a world where all our problems are taken away with the snap of the fingers
a world where our enemies are made to vanish - instantly,
a world of peace and plenty and happiness,
a world where we and those we love can have everything a person desires.

That is what the Messiah is supposed to do -
the Messiah is supposed to make our world better, to bring in the age of
peace and plenty with a blink of his eye
and - if there must be a bit of fighting at the very beginning to get rid
of those who oppress us, well, it will be a glorious affair, one with no
injury or cost to the good guys, one where the enemy will be routed
completely and where those who have fought for the king will be honored in
their victory with him and the world will be safe forevermore....

Do you agree???

From the moment that Peter and the other disciples recognized Jesus as the
Messiah, from that time Jesus began to explain to them that he must suffer
and that he must be killed and on the third day rise.

Just as Peter - I would love to be able to tell you that this isn't the way
things must be.

But God's ways - praise be to God - are not our ways.

The emblem of our faith is not a crown - but a cross.

And the field of battle upon which our Lord wins his victory is not the
sand of Judah and of Palestine but the hearts of men and women like you and
I.

I ask you - what is God fighting against in you and me - what kind of battle
ground is he having to negotiate to save your soul?
- we and God are fighting against the lusts and greed of the flesh with our
master, these are the enemy of flesh and blood, but couple that with the
principalities and powers of this world, the world's way of doing things -
the way which began when the serpent suggested to Eve that she could become
like God if she simply reached out her hand and took the fruit that God said
she should not eat.

As it is with seeds that are meant to be flowers - so it is for us.
The seed must first be planted then nurtured until it produces its fruit.

- so it is with Christ.

And a life worth living is not found by clinging to the life we have, and surrounding it with all the toys that the world affords us.

Rather it is found by letting go of ourselves and our own selfish desires and our own feeble way of understanding things - and being obedient to the one who makes the seeds grow and flourish.

Yes Peter, Jesus must suffer and must die - and yes, that seems so wrong - but listen

- didn't you also hear him say "and on the third day be raised?"

As I worked on this homely this week I noticed, as many of you have, that a lot of the trees appear to be dead from the drought, and yet as I look closer I see sighs of our Loving Lord at work. An Example: We have some burning bushes on the North side of our house and these plants have been hammered by the heat. The plants closest to the house have received water from our sprinkler system and they have survived the heat thanks to the life giving waters. The bushes on the far end of the bed have not received water and they looked like they were dead. Leaves turned brown and fell off. There were just bare stems. This week, I noticed after the God given rains of the past week that the bushes that looked dead, the one that had lost all of their leaves are coming back, the stems have greened up and putting off new leaves.

These plants really brought new meaning and a renewed richness to our reading this morning from Jeremiah when he said:

"If you return, I will restore you and you shall stand before me ..

If you utter what is precious.. you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you .. they shall not prevail over you for I am with you..."

In the Gospel, Jesus says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?"

I know this bothers you because it bothers me - I know that we have worked hard for what we have and shouldn't have to share it with those who haven't worked as hard. I know all that we have done and I know that other folk, those who have not worked as hard will be standing in line ahead of us when we gather to see St. Peter - but haven't you heard?!

It is not only about what you are being asked to give up, it is not only about dying to your self - to your idea of what is good and what it is not good

- it is not only about taking up your cross and doing his will instead of indulging your own.

It is also about gaining the very thing you and indeed everyone else needs the most: a life worth living - a life that gives life - a life that is joyful and unafraid - a life which death cannot destroy - a life in which the kingdom of God draws near and is lived and shared with all.

Yes, I talk about how you need to die to yourself each day and to put God's will first in your lives, and yes, it is not going to be fun or easy - especially at first; - but think about what is coming and think about what you will become.

Think about the wealth and talents God has blessed you with and then God asks you to be a good steward of that wealth and talent.

Or not.

God has certainly given you that choice.

Amen