

## **Twenty Fourth Sunday of the year – September 13, 2014**

Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

All human relationships are based on communication, understanding and acceptance. The Bible tells us that God created man and called him from non-life to life, from nothingness to existence, in order to build a deep relationship expressed in honoring, loving and serving him. Generally we find three types of persons in life: persons who listen attentively to God, persons who suffer for God and persons who deeply experience the presence of God and live in it. A well designed life has both joy and sorrow, thought and action. A life of Joy and no sorrow can become like a terrain with all sunshine and no rain, a barren desert. Both sufferings and joy, and both faith and good works are necessary for the life of a good Christian. We realize that every human person is the being whom God has enabled to "listen", like the disciples. He is a disciple of God, which entails not only theoretical listening, but also the kind of listening that leads to action, to the implementation of what he has heard, of the original voice that precedes him and that regulates his life. In other words, man is an obedient disciple of God. Suffering is the anvil on which man is forged; it is the mold in which his personality is shaped; it is the real and mysterious code of the human condition. However, man is the being assisted by God, in whom God shows his constant and effective presence. However God wants man to search the divine presence in hi. In the Gospel of today Jesus asks disciples who they think he really is and Peter responds to say that Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one. But he misunderstands the full implication of the Messiah. In the first reading the Prophet reflects on his mission. Any hardship or suffering cannot break his trust and confidence in God. In the second reading James tells us that faith without works is dead. Living faith will perform works of charity.

In the First Reading prophet Isaiah presents several fascinating portrayals of the servant of the Lord. This servant contrasts with the faithless monarchs presented in the earlier sections. The servant does not rebel but listens to God's word. From an earlier oracle we know the servant received a special commission from the very beginning. A later oracle will describe the servant's loyalty to God up to the very moment of death. These very descriptions of such a loyal servant of God contrasts with the lifeless idols the world worships. In fact this portion of Isaiah contains heaviest concentration of material ridiculing the very notion of making idols of the created things. The servant is surrounded by opposition mounted by a disbelieving world. He suffers abuses from all sides and is challenged from all over. Perhaps

these conditions reflect the experience of Israel in exile where they had to face constant disgrace and confrontation. But the servant is not swayed by such hardships. Confident in a strong relationship with God, the servant is prepared for any challenge. They strike him on his face, spit on him, and pluck his beard. Yet the servant's resolve is not shaken. He remains unmoved in the face of adversities. It is the Lord God alone who will be the help and support to him. His is the example of living faith that tells us to set our hearts on Divine things so we too can enjoy a priceless personal relationship with the Lord God.

In the Second Reading James speaking on the subject of faith and belief says that Christians must be doers of the word and not hearers only. The Christian faith is not a series of theoretical truths but a practical way of living based on Christ's revelation to us. Faith alone that is a mental acceptance of all revealed truth is of no avail toward eternal life unless a person follows Christ in his daily living. This will demand the carrying out of spiritual and corporal works of mercy. James tells us that faith is dead when it does not show itself in the acts of love. Such dead faith is as helpful as mere words to a poor person in need of food and clothing. It is not real faith. He tells us that faith is alive when it manifests itself in works of charity.

Anyone who claims to have faith but does not practice charity is not living the Christian faith. Therefore we have to give ourselves, share what we have, not just give charity from our surplus. Charity is something we do with the generosity of our heart and give to the other from what we have and what really hurts. True faith is living faith. It is a faith that bears fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit. There is no such thing as an indwelling Holy Spirit who is dormant. The grace of God is always at work. If our faith is strong we do not need anything else. Jesus himself has told us that we must manifest that we are his followers through our works.

In today's Gospel Mark gives us two incidents in the public life of Jesus which are closely connected. His mission was given by the Father to proclaim the kingdom and be with them as the messiah. Here we have the first of the three predictions of Jesus about his imminent sufferings, death and resurrection. As such it makes a turning point in this Gospel. Here we have Mark's carefully constructed theology of the cross which will evolve around his three passion predictions. Each passion prediction including this one has three parts. First, there is the prediction by Jesus of his suffering, death and resurrection. Second, there is the rejection and misunderstanding by the disciples regarding the sayings of Jesus. Third there is a corrective teaching by Jesus which stresses some theological aspect and the meaning of discipleship. Here in this episode, Jesus insists on an important point, one which is very dear to his heart: that of knowledge. Do the men, the women, the

disciples he chose to follow him and to continue his work later on know exactly who he is? The knowledge of God and the knowledge of Jesus Christ are important and capital for us. Upon this knowledge depends our participation in the divine life. From it derives the importance and necessity of the Church's teaching and proclamation of Christ, in good times and bad! The Church is missionary and she proclaims the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ. The Church of all times and all places must proclaim his message throughout the whole world: Jesus, the Son of God, died and rose again for the Salvation of all men of goodwill.

The Gospel of today seeks to give us the true identity of Jesus and invites us to make our personal discovery of the master. For the disciples it was indeed a new revelation. Jesus by now had already spent more than two years in his public ministry. The disciples had gone along with him and were getting to know him personally in his teaching, his healing, his liberating power and his authority. He had a large crowd following him everywhere and had a faithful band of disciples who were constantly with him, helping him and supporting him. They had lived with him, listened to his teachings, seen his miracles and had become part of his life. The question for the master is whether they really understood his mission and the proclamation of the kingdom. He had a mission to fulfill as given by the Father and he had called them to be a part of that mission. On their way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus began asking his disciples, about the reaction of the people about him and how they were interpreting his presence, teaching and his works. They responded by saying that some believed he was John the Baptist, other Elijah and still others, one of the prophets. People accepted him as a spiritual person and the one who was preaching things divine. They were also aware that Elijah had not tasted death and believed he would return to show the path of the Messiah. John the Baptist was killed by Herod but being a holy person had come back to life to continue his mission. Jeremiah, they believed had hidden the Ark of the Covenant as people were taken into exile and the belief was that he would come to show where it actually is placed.

Jesus then asked the disciples directly about their personal understanding of Jesus. They had been with him for some time and they had professed their faith in him. Now he wanted to know how much they had understood about his position as the Messiah. Immediately Peter, the Leader of the group, gave a clear, precise and accurate confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. The word 'Christ' comes from a Greek word meaning anointed. The 'Anointed One' is a clear way of referring to the Messiah, the long-awaited liberating King of Israel. Jesus accepts this confession of Peter done on behalf of the disciples. Clearly, it had been a high point in the relationship of Jesus with disciples, but this was not complete. Peter

received an appreciation from Jesus for this confession and profession of faith. He told him this is indeed a divine revelation from the Father. Even though Peter was correct, Jesus did not want this to get around until the actual time of his death and resurrection when the full meaning of it will be known. He wished to tell them even more about himself and the type of Messiah he was called upon to be. He indeed cautioned the disciples that people were not ready to hear that Jesus the Rabbi was the Messiah. This revelation was only to them. At this juncture, quite unexpectedly, Jesus gave the full explanation of the role of messiah to the disciples. Jesus began to tell them what this Messiah is and certainly as it has been already explained in the scriptures. He will suffer greatly, will be rejected by the leaders of his own people, will be executed as a criminal, and on the third day he will rise to life. This clearly came as a real shock to the disciples. They could not grasp his message. This was not the kind of Messiah they were taught to expect. Their Messiah was a liberating, glorious King of Israel.

Peter was offended by these words of Jesus about the suffering Messiah. He point-blank rejected what Jesus said about the sufferings and death and a serious squabble broke out between them which resulted in the serious action of Peter being reprimanded. Mark tells us that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Peter acting in the name of disciples and divinely inspired, came forward to say that this sort of thing must never happen to their Master. His rejection of the suffering Messiah would have reflected the understanding of most people at that time. It would have been the contradiction in terms. The Messiah was to be a successful warrior who would liberate the people from their oppressors. Jesus reacted strongly to Peter as he turned and looked at his disciples. He spoke to Peter and indirectly to the disciples with the words: "Get behind me, Satan. Your ways of thinking are human not God's." Peter had become a real temptation, a stumbling block in the way of Jesus' mission and work. This was a major turning point in the Gospel story. We are now being given the answer to the question who Jesus really is. Now we are called upon to know his inner meaning that he is the Messiah-King. But he is the kind of messiah that suffers and dies for us. The rest of Mark's Gospel account is replying to this question. It will conclude with the centurion at the foot of the cross declaring: "Surely this man is Son of God." In fact very similar are the opening words of Mark: "This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Jesus therefore makes his demands of us as he did to the disciples, to understand his mission and to follow him closely. He told Peter and his companions that if any one chose to be his disciple should deny himself, take up his cross, and follow him. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for the

sake of Jesus and the gospel's will save it. It was certainly a challenging call that the Lord gave to his followers and in this hard way we ought to discover and find him in our lives. The Gospel in fact tells us that Jesus began to teach them how the son of man is going to suffer and he teaches us that we too ought to suffer with him. Peter and Paul both followed Jesus closely, each bearing his respective cross. Both suffered for having proclaimed the gospel: Peter had the privilege to die on the cross, like his Master, although he asked to be attached to the cross upside-down, not considering himself worthy to die in the same manner as the Savior. Paul, after having undergone many sufferings during his numerous voyages, was decapitated, which was the punishment reserved to Roman citizens. Peter, Paul, all the disciples of Christ bore their crosses, whether literally or figuratively.

The corrective teaching of Jesus focuses on the meaning of true discipleship. A disciple is one who understands the Master, follows him closely, imitates his life and communicates it to others. Here we find Jesus proclaiming almost the reversal of what most people would expect. Jesus himself is the model of discipleship. He explains that the discipleship is not about achieving power, prestige or high position. It is ultimately about service, giving one's life for others. Ironically discipleship involves losing one's life, or giving it away in service of others, which will result in actually gaining one's life through the following in the footsteps of Jesus. Through the action of Jesus the Cross, which was the sign of horrible suffering, insurrection and humiliating death becomes the sign of hope, victory and new life. Jesus the Messiah is indeed a liberator but in the understanding of the people and the disciples but a person of service for humanity. Jesus tells us that to be a Christian disciple is not primarily to save one's soul or go to heaven, but to enter fully into the mainstream of human living and human concerns, to become part of it through loving and sharing and building up with others as Jesus did. We ask the grace that we may respond to his call and discover what Jesus is for us in our day to day events of life.

A little Chinese girl about eight years old was a close observer of the Missionary priest of their village church. She used to watch him at his prayers in the church, listened closely to his teaching and preaching, and watched him as he went about visiting the sick or consoling those in sorrow and pain. She stopped with him and cheered people as he greeted them in the street. He always had a kind word, a smile, a little advice for the young and sometimes a sweet for the children. One day the girl went to the neighboring village. They were having catechism that day and the Sister was telling them of the man who was always kind, who helped the sick, cheered up those discouraged and sad, and who always went about doing

well. Noticing the strange girl the Sister asked her if she knew who this Person was. The girl quickly replied: “He is the Missionary Father from our Village.”

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