**13th SUNDAY after PENTECOST SERMON: Matthew 16:21-27**

Today’s gospel reading is closely tied to last week's Gospel reading. Remember last Sunday, in answer to the question by Jesus: *who do you say that I am,* Peter clearly stated: *you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*. As the Gospel today continues: *"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*

These words were hard for the disciples to hear because it was so different from their expectations of what the Messiah was supposed to be. Peter didn't want to hear them either. *"So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'"* "But Jesus rebuked Peter saying:  *'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'"* Notice here, that last Sunday’s gospel, Jesus called Peter **the rock**. Now Jesus called him a **stumbling block** to his path toward Jerusalem -- that is, to his suffering and death.

And then Jesus delivered **an additional shock** when he declared that suffering and death were part and parcel not only of his messiahship but also of those who follow him. In no uncertain terms, Jesus said:  *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?'"*

**"If any want to become my followers"** Remember that several Sundays ago when Jesus began calling his disciples? These disciples left everything to follow Jesus.  The followers of Jesus knew that the cost of discipleship was everything. What they did not realize until then was that *everything* included the cross – suffering and death.

Jesus continued: **"let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"** (v. 24c).  First Jesus mentions self-denial, but that is just the beginning.  Jesus also expects disciples to bear a cross.  A cross is where a person dies.

Now, what we see in these passages is a clear example of how the meaning of discipleship is slowly unfolding.  The disciples did not fully understand discipleship when they signed on. They were slow to understand.

The same is true with us. We are also slow to understand.   However, let us realize that when we became Christians, we decided to follow Jesus. Then we began to see that this involved self-denial, then taking up our cross, then crucifixion and death. End of the story.

Except that this isn't the end of the story!  Jesus continues to say: **"For those who want to save their life** **will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it"** (v. 25). From the very beginning of his teaching in this Gospel, Jesus taught the Great Reversal: *the first will be last, the last will be first, the master will be servant, the servant will be master* , **those who want to save their life** **will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it"**

What Jesus is telling us is that there are two roads which represent two contrasting ways of life. The first way is that of saving our lives out of fear. The other road is losing our lives out of faith. One road is traveled by the people who seek an easy way out. The other is followed by people who take the hard way for the sake of the kingdom.

A Story: I lived in Rome for six years and I have visited many magnificent basilicas and cathedrals. There was one that I will never forget: the little chapel called **THE QUO VADIS CHAPEL** which is found along the road named Via Appia Antica and just before the gate that lead out of the walled city of Rome. As the story goes, Peter was so disappointed with his ministry among the Romans that, afraid and desperate, he decided to take the road out ….. the easy way out of Rome. Along the way, Peter met the Lord Jesus walking into the city of Rome. So Peter stopped and asked Jesus: ***Quo vadis, domine***…where are you going Lord? Jesus replied, *To Rome, to be crucified again to save the Romans*. Peter understood and was struck to the heart. He turned back to Rome and there he was crucified on the cross upside down. (The place where Jesus and Peter met, now stands the **THE QUO VADIS CHAPEL.**

Today we are faced with the sufferings and deaths of the corona virus pandemic; of the fires that are burning in our state of California, in the economic dislocations, in the racial disturbances and protests, in our children going to on line school, and so on and so forth.

Two roads stand before us today in the face of all these: one road as the easy way out like Peter; or another road by Jesus – the road of the cross and crucifixion for the salvation of all.

The way of Jesus was not the safe and popular road, this was not the advantageous road --- but I believe, this is the true road in spite of everything.

I leave you with the words of the poet Robert Frost who said it so well,

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

Amen.

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