

Mark 8:31-38^{v vi}

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

^v About the Gospel: Mark 8:31-38

Today's reading begins with the first prediction of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. In Mark, the three predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) are set into a common pattern: (1) prediction, (2) misunderstanding by the disciples and (3) teaching on discipleship.

Peter offers Jesus the title of Messiah, "the Christ" (8:29). In Mark, the general expectation of the Messiah seems to be a political leader. Jesus rejects this understanding. Mark reiterates throughout his gospel that Jesus' disciples cannot truly understand the meaning of Jesus as Messiah before, or apart from, the crucifixion. Peter rejects the thought of a suffering Messiah, implicitly tempting Jesus to the same false messiahship offered by Satan in the wilderness. The disciples are called to the total surrender of all assertion of self that clings to personal desires over the will of God.

^{vi} Reflection and Response

To the modern ear, the story of Abraham ready to sacrifice his son sounds too brutal, too primitive. It is hard for us to relate to human sacrifice, or this last-minute, quick save.

Yet when we turn to the reading from Romans, we realize that the sacrifice of Isaac, averted at the last second, actually happened to Jesus. We are struck by the powerlessness of God, handing over God's own Son to the

cruelty of crucifixion. This is the ultimate point to which God's love leads, and will lead us if we follow: the willingness to sacrifice even what is most precious.

As Paul points out, if God is willing to do that for us, what would God not do? Knowing that God is so completely for us, how could we worry about anything standing against us? Paul asks six questions that give us food for thought this Lent and the impetus to turn back to God who has given everything for us.

The gospel continues in the same vein. Flawed mortals find it heartening that the Church's first human leader was a person who made frequent mistakes. This time, Peter is so far out of line that Jesus even calls him "Satan." And yet, Peter voices what many of us feel: a reluctance to suffer, a wariness of rejection and a fear of death. Peter is simply more open in expressing feelings that we disguise more cleverly.

The antidote Jesus proposes to his followers must sound as cozy to them as embracing the electric chair would to us. They knew what the cross was for: an instrument of torture and execution. We use sophisticated lethal injections at remote penitentiaries; they did the dirty business publicly in the streets.

Yet Jesus proposes that the only way out is through, that we must embrace that which we fear the most. Suffering, rejection and death are part and parcel of the human experience. Jesus challenges us to seize our lives, prickly and annoying as they sometimes are, and transform them. He would not only talk about this way of transformation; He would soon show them how to do it.