

Matthew 16:21-28

In our Gospel today, Jesus talks to followers about discipleship. In particular, Jesus talks about his experience – his ministry, which includes his suffering and his sacrifice - he shows the disciples that the way of the cross (his way) will be extremely challenging. And, even more disturbing, he invites the disciples to follow in his footsteps – to accept the same struggle – the same life of sacrifice and service (he tells his followers that this is what true discipleship looks like). He speaks directly to them – “... If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me...” (This is another tough reading – this calling is hard on the disciples – and it’s hard for us to hear as well.)

I think Jesus probably struggled with his disciples – at times (often in fact). Peter and Andrew – James and John (and the others) – I think the disciples often missed the point behind his teachings. They often demonstrated a stubborn refusal to hear what Jesus was saying. And, it must have been frustrating for Jesus, at times – to share the same message over and over again – with a group of followers who often missed the point.

In the passage of scripture just before our reading today, Jesus asks the disciples a very interesting question - who do people say that I am? And they answer, ‘Some say John the Baptist; and others Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He then asks, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ He asks his followers – who am I to you? And Peter answers, ‘You are the Messiah – the Son of God...’

Now, the disciples had been travelling with Jesus for quite some time and they’d heard the people talking – they’d heard the claims that the people were making.

And then, Jesus turns to his disciples – “But who do you say that I am?” (Am I a teacher – am I a brother – am I a friend?)

Peter is the first to respond – he answers “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”. Translated into Greek, Peter describes Jesus as the Christ – the anointed one.

When the Jewish people talked about the Christ, they were talking about their King – the new David.

And for Peter, at least, Jesus was a King – a liberator. This was his belief and his hope. And, Jesus accepts this title – he responds to Peter – “...blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven...”

But then (in our reading today) Jesus starts to talk about his life and ministry (his suffering and death) – as the Messiah (the Son of the living God). And, at this point, the wheels fall off.

Peter becomes quite disturbed (he doesn't understand) – he wants a different Messiah a different King – he doesn't want a suffering Messiah or a dead Messiah. (He doesn't see Christ in the suffering of Jesus – he wants David.) And he certainly doesn't see the glory of God in his own suffering.)

Peter wasn't ready for this faith – he wasn't ready to carry the words of Jesus in his heart. Peter and the other disciples were still holding onto something else.

So, in our reading today we're shown a God who is often hidden behind our own personal dreams and assumptions and our expectations. And, this is the rub – this is where the rubber hits the road. Today, we're shown a Messiah who challenges us and suffers with us – a Messiah who calls us to question our self-serving hopes and our self-serving beliefs. The life of a Christian is not an easy life – it's not a self-serving life.

At times, I think we can be a bit like the disciples who followed Jesus (drawn to Jesus by his love and his service - and the hope of resurrection and renewal) - looking for a prophet to lead us and liberate us. We can be a bit like the disciples, who were looking for a King to lead them to greatness.

In our gospel today, Peter rebukes Jesus when he talks about his death. A Messiah who suffers and dies – this is the truth that Jesus was called to share with the world – is this the God that we are called to follow. And, Peter struggled with this message – and he struggled with this call to follow.

Like the disciples, we also travel with Jesus. As Christians, we eat with him and listen to his words – we do this here every week (and hopefully every day in our own homes). But, are we ready to accept this suffering Messiah – are we ready to follow – to be like this suffering Messiah?

Like the disciples, at time we will struggle with this faith. At times, our belief and hopes can be quite self-serving. Like the disciples, we too will be tempted

to turn away when we are confronted by this wounded healer – when we are called to take up our cross and follow.

But, beyond our self-interest and our limited understanding, we too can catch a glimpse of the true Jesus – if we are daring. “...those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for the sake of the Gospel will save it...”

Today we are reminded that Jesus is our suffering Messiah – the one who calls us to follow – the one who invites us to share the life of God – to become one with a God of love and compassion and sacrifice. We are called to honour the teachings of Jesus – as our compass when we lose sight of our calling – our guide when we stray from the path. In Christ, we see more than just a liberator – we see a road (the way), which is the freedom to love and serve God and each other.

Today, we are shown that this is the path to true liberation and freedom. This is what it means to truly see and serve our wounded healer.

The Lord be with you.