

Pastor Writes

Greetings to you! We are now in the 2nd Sunday in lent and our theme for the morning is, 'Jesus the messiah accepted suffering according to his Father's will, and calls his disciples to follow him.' In our world today there are many evangelists and tele-evangelists who proffer a Gospel of prosperity. Their claim is that if anyone is a follower of Jesus then there will be tremendous amount of material blessings. They argue that your riches are an indication of how faithful you have been to God. However, Jesus teaches us that following him as his disciple is the way of the cross, a way of suffering and a way of death. This again was according to the Father's will and he calls his disciples to walk in the path of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The teachings of Christ are contrary to the teachings of the prosperity Gospel.

In today's Gospel reading - Mark ch 8, Jesus and his disciples went out to the village around Caesarea Philippi and as they were walking along, Jesus asked them 'Who do people say that I am?' The disciples responded by saying that some people felt he was John the Baptist, others felt he was Elijah or one of the prophets. Elijah and John the Baptist were great prophets and so some people considered Jesus as a great prophet. However laudatory this may be, it falls short about the truth of Jesus. In our world there are many who are willing to accept Jesus as a great man, a great prophet, a great teacher but are not willing to accept him as God. Jesus then turns the question to the disciples and asks them directly, 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the messiah'. Even though Peter recognized Jesus as the messiah, Peter did not have a clear understanding about the role of the messiah. He was always thinking that Jesus would reign in power and authority, would destroy the Romans and give them freedom from the Romans. So even though Peter proclaims that he is the messiah, he has not understood him completely.

Jesus then began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. The death that Jesus will undergo was something voluntary for the sake of saving all humanity. The suffering of the Son of Man is the necessary means for fulfilling the messianic mission. Peter was however annoyed with this and took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Jesus however rebuked Peter saying, 'Get behind me satan!' 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns'. This stern rebuke is because Peter's suggestions meant avoiding the way of the cross. It was the same temptation that the devil tempted him when he began his ministry. In other words Jesus clearly shows that salvation for all humanity would only be achieved through his suffering, death and glory.

Jesus then calls the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me.' Denying oneself meant dying to the love of self, to the love of possessions, to the love of praise, to the love of power and to take up the cross. Dying to the love of self has to be an ongoing process as Paul says, 'Put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature; sexual immorality, impurities, lust, evil desire and greed, which is idolatry.' The selfish self wants to be gratified immediately and therefore has no self-control. But this has to die. Dying to the love of possessions is also very difficult as we always want to buy more and more things. Dying to the love of praise is another area which we find difficult to handle because human beings love to be flattered. Finally dying to the love of power is something that we need to inculcate. We need to ask ourselves as to what motivates our discipleship. Following Christ is the way of the cross and so Christ calls us to radically follow him. Jesus concludes his teachings saying, 'for whoever wants to save their lives will lose it and whoever loses their life for him and for the gospel will save it.' The death of those who follow him as they deliberately choose the way of the cross, paradoxically is the way to life. This death is embraced for the sake of the gospel and therefore will have eternal life. Those who endure rejection by others will be welcomed by the Son of Man in glory.

As we go through this period of lent let us accept the cross as our way of life and deny ourselves, let us die to the love of self, possessions, instant gratifications and have self-control over our souls and bodies. May we truly follow Christ in his suffering, death and glory.

Shalom

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