

## **“Taking Up the Cross”**

**March 16, 2003 - Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

**Our Lenten journey asks us to focus on the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross is one of the best known Christian symbols. The depth of its meaning often escapes us. Today’s readings let us to understand that God gives us the son, Jesus, to die for us. We have here in the Gospel of Mark the first of three “passion predictions.” Three times Jesus will reveal to his disciples that he must suffer and die. What is so remarkable about this is that both God and Jesus *freely* choose this path. We can hear echoes of the Genesis passage in today’s Gospel. Abraham demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The good news is that Abraham is spared from having to do this. Jesus does not share the same fate as Isaac. What does this mean to u? What are the benefits of the cross? Paul tells us the cross is a sign that nothing can separate us from the love of God. What power there is in the cross! What does this mean for us as disciples, as followers of Jesus? It is only when we are able to face the cross that we can truly proclaim Jesus as Lord.**

**We are confronted with another turning point in Jesus’ ministry. The prelude to this point is the baptism, temptation and healing stories. We find an interesting format in Mark. First, Jesus announces his passion. Next, there is misunderstanding on the part of the disciples. Finally, Jesus provides detailed instruction on the nature of discipleship. The immediate background to today’s story is Peter’s “confession” about Jesus. When our Lord asks, “Who am I?” Peter answers, “The Christ!” Good for Peter! This is one of the times when he gets it right! Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God.**

**However, there is a problem. It has to do with Peter and others expectations of the Messiah, “the savior.” The Israelites in Jesus’ day were looking for a particular kind of savior. We need to remember that Israel was an occupied country at this time. The Roman army controlled the land, the Roman government imposed taxes and laws, and collaborators ran the country. Peter wanted a military, political and nationalistic hero that would overthrow the Romans. He was no different from most others in his time. They wanted a return to the good old days when they were in sole control of their destiny. The difficulty shows itself in that this was not Jesus’ definition of his ministry.**

**Peter may have had one right answer, but now he was wrong. Poor Peter! He gets it right, but now he gets it wrong in a big way! Yes, Jesus is the Christ, but he is not here to fulfill Peter’s desire for a military or political messiah. Jesus is following God’s plan and it directly conflicts with what most people wanted. It’s common problem that lingers with us even today. We want Jesus to fix our problems and give us what we want.**

**This is what William Willmon of Duke Seminary calls the “gap” problem. A great gap exists between who we think Jesus ought to be and ought to do with whom Jesus is in reality. We can be glad that Jesus confronts Peter over the difference. The good news is that Jesus ministers to us and our misunderstandings. Jesus corrects us and never gives up on us. Jesus may rebuke Peter, but he doesn’t stop there. He goes on to explain what he is all about. Eventually, Peter and the other disciples will**

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**come to understand his mission. The same thing can happen for us. In spite of our misunderstandings of Jesus, the Holy Spirit keeps working to reveal to us the true nature of Jesus Christ. It is when we understand his ministry we can truly become what it means to be a disciple.**

**In both the story from Genesis and the Gospel of Mark comes an important revelation about God. Power exists in surrender, not force. The cause of the gap that exists is a form of idolatry. Peter and the others are not willing to give up their expectations of Jesus. We are no different today. We aren't looking for the living God. We want a god that will meet us on our terms and meet our expectations. We seek easy and simple answers that demand nothing or little of us. We want a god that conforms to our image ... not a God that expects us to change!**

**Where's the solution to this dilemma? The gospel can provide the answers to our deepest questions and most pressing problems. Are we willing to make the sacrifice that is necessary? Are we willing to give up those things or people that are dearest and closest to us? Just when we think we might be drawing closer to an insight, the Gospel asks another question! How will we live? If we are willing to look at and listen to Jesus, we will find answers. The growing challenge between Jesus and his disciples is to come to an understanding what God wants. Think about it. Jesus and his followers have been together for some time now. Jesus begins to say things that make demands on them. The crowds begin to get smaller. Not everyone wants to follow Jesus. He's no longer just performing miracles, he's demanding a new way of living!**

**The shock of it all is the Jesus doesn't act like the Messiah we want. He announces that the way of Christ is the way of the cross! The reality is that we can never get to Easter without first going through Good Friday! We have to deny ourselves ... our expectations, our prejudices and our demands. It's not about us ... it's about God. We must take up our cross. We must understand that Jesus is not here to take away our suffering. To follow Jesus we must give up everything else! And I do mean everything! How strange! This isn't easy! It's not what we expected! This is another subtle reminder that our ways are not God's ways. Jesus has a clear mission and it doesn't coincide with our wish list. Jesus doesn't come to fix us ... he comes to save us!**

**The question that remains is will we take the risk? The Gospel spells out a new adventure for us. It promises a way for us to meet God and have God journey with us. We have to stop looking for God to be our personal fixing machine. We have to make sacrifices. The time has come for us to live with the uncertainty and insecurity of life. It's time to give up all those things we depend upon but don't give us life. It's time for us to place our trust solely in God. All this is caught up in Jesus' words, “ ... take up your cross and come follow me.”**