

Lent 2 2018 Mark 8: 31-38

Peter, first Pope, chief Apostle, teacher and defender of the faith. A pillar of the Early Church, purported benefactor of the Gospel of Mark, and martyr. It is little wonder that Saint Peter gets so much good press amongst Christians!

But there is one thing missing from this list. One thing, in fact, that is among Peter's greatest gift- Peter had the unique ability to find precisely the wrong moment to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, Peter was an expert at opening his mouth and putting his foot in it.

Listen to the example from today's Gospel.

“Then Jesus 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 of this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him...”

Now at first, we might be tempted to think that Peter simply forgot himself and he got so caught up in the thought of Jesus' death that he spoke out of turn. But if we were to go back a couple of verses before the beginning of today's Gospel reading to verse 29, we would hear Peter answer Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” with certainty and affirmation: “You are the Messiah”.

Without giving it a second thought, Peter professes that Jesus is the Messiah one minute and scolds him like an irresponsible teenager the next. We might imagine that the other disciples watched this scene unfold anxiously, as children watching their brother or sister arguing with their parents at the dinner table.

But it is what happens after all of this that is truly shocking.

Jesus says, “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.”

That is the moment that Peter and the disciples realized that the God they wanted was not the God made known in Jesus Christ. The disciples wanted a God who would be a political and military leader, leading the charge to put the Romans in their place once and for all. They wanted someone who would raise them up to a position of power and importance and they wanted someone so radical that their enemies would cower and flee. They were convinced that the keys to a good life were strength and power.

Instead, they got someone who taught about loving others, feeding the hungry, and foretold his own impending death at the hands of the very same powers he was supposed to overthrow.

With this in mind, it is easier to understand why Peter was so upset. If we had been standing where he and the other disciples were standing, we might also have been upset.

But then again, who among us hasn't wanted a God who just swoops down at the first sign of trouble and sets things right? The disciples were not the only ones who believed that the key to a good life were strength and power. Sometimes we think that too.

But this attitude about God also shows up in places that aren't so self-serving. When tragedy strikes, we pray and pray and pray for a different outcome and yet God seems far away from us. Those of us who have been at the bedside of a friend or family member who died soon find ourselves staring into the cold, dark silence of death, feeling abandoned by God.

"Why doesn't God just fix all of this?" we wonder. If God loves us, why do we have to suffer?

But as Mark reminds us, if we are to confess Jesus as Messiah, we must do so by standing at the foot of the cross as he is crucified. The God we worship is about more than fixing our lives. The God we worship is about laying down his life for the sake of our own.

The moment we allow this truth to penetrate deep into our souls is the same moment we realize that the suffering we see around us—in the hospital bed, in the prison, on the street, in the mirror—is none other than the crucified Christ laying down his life again and again in the midst of our suffering.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Taking up our cross means recognizing Christ crucified in the suffering world around us, and then recalling that true discipleship is paved by the way of our own cross.

But walking the way of the cross and proclaiming Christ crucified isn't the end of the story. No, it's just the beginning! The story continues on, through Lent to the resurrection of Easter.

But we cannot know the fullness of Christ's resurrection unless we are willing to know Christ crucified. The Great Fifty Days of Easter find their meaning

only after the solemn forty days of Lent. Easter morning finds its truth only through Good Friday.

And so, as we continue our journey through this holy season of Lent, may we walk alongside one another, bearing our crosses and proclaiming the faith of Christ crucified—the faith of overwhelming love, grace, and of radical mercy. May our hearts be filled with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection!

Amen.