

25th Sunday
9/22/2024

A SUFFERING AND SERVING MESSIAH

Denial. It's not just a river in Egypt. People who struggle with alcohol, drugs, pornography or other addictions experience denial. Those who are sick or dying may experience denial and their families may also experience denial. Perhaps what the apostles experienced in the gospel was denial. *They were afraid to question him.* Can you blame them? Last week we heard Jesus tell the apostles of his approaching passion and death. This week he tells them again what will happen. He's redefining what it means to be the messiah. Jesus will be a suffering messiah.

What were you arguing about on the way? Why should they remain silent? They were silent because they knew what they had been doing was shallow. Part of denial can be taking refuge in that which is shallow, something can distract us from what we don't want to hear or think about. But Jesus didn't call the apostles and he doesn't call us to be shallow. He calls us to the depths of faith, hope and charity. Pope Benedict XVI note, that while geographically close to Jesus, the apostles experienced an inner distance. There's a logic at work here but it's not human logic. It's divine logic, a logic of the cross. They are on two very different wavelengths. He would say that Jesus always demands — a profound con-version, a change in the way we think and live. It demands that we open our hearts. That we listen and allow ourselves to be transformed from within.

Jesus' response is noteworthy. He doesn't scold the apostles. He sits down which is the position of teacher in that culture and like a good, patient teacher, he both explains and gives an example. He speaks of the first being last. He tries to share the divine logic and re-tune the apostles to the wavelength of God—a wavelength of service. As with a good teacher, it's important to pay attention to the words spoken. The one who wishes to be the greatest shall be, *the servant of all*, not of some but the servant *of all*.

The greatest service Jesus did was by being betrayed, maligned, tortured and put on display to die before the world. He made a complete gift of himself. On the Cross, he truly became the suffering servant of all. Jesus isn't just a suffering messiah but a serving messiah.

Living lives of service whether in family, professional life or any other way allow us to continue the serving work of Jesus. We strive to see Jesus in those we serve, and hopefully in some way, reveal Jesus to them. Elsewhere Jesus says, *I am among you as the one who serves.*

Jesus goes on to illustrate his point with a child. Now this can seem very sweet and sentimental but notice the grammar. The child isn't a he or a she. The child was an it. A child was without rights, a child was property. A child was someone vulnerable at the edges, on the peripheries of society. Jesus speaks of hospitality to the child and yet the world can be a place of hostility to children, born and unborn, in many ways. Receiving a child in this sense includes the poor, the insignificant and the forgotten. We grow in loving service of others, particularly those who can't pay us back. Jesus identifies himself with the unimportant people of the world. One author has said that if you want to hug Jesus, hug someone who is of no esteem. In doing so, we not only receive Jesus but the Father who sent him.

Like the apostles, we can fall into denial because what Jesus says is so scary. We can fill our lives with things that are superficial, shallow and selfish. We can try to elbow our way ahead of others.

In the second reading St. James contrasts selfishness and generosity. Jealousy and self-seeking differ from the wisdom from above that is pure, peaceable, gentle, compliant and full of mercy and good fruits. Why so much internal strife? Our desires, our passions can get disordered. Desire isn't bad but to desire what is disordered, what comes from our selfishness and self-seeking is. We're not at peace yet we seek peace in ways that we think might deliver but they don't. Think of the song, *Looking for love in all the wrong places.*

Someone did that for a number of years prior to his conversion was St. Augustine. He said to God, *In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things you created.* Eventually he could say, *Our hearts are restless O Lord, until they rest in you.* True peace with God can lead to peace in our lives. We grow in that peace through prayer, through embracing the cross, informed by the word of God, strengthened by the sacraments, healed through Reconciliation and nourished by Eucharist. We encourage one another as we journey to God together.

A good examination of conscience is simply to ask, in the depth of my heart, what is it that I truly desire? It is good or bad? selfish or generous?

At times, we too need to hear Jesus patiently explain to us the logic of God and the value of service, to all. May we then do what he did and live our lives not in the shallowness of egoism and pride. Rather, nourished by the Eucharist and striving to live lives of intentional faith, together, we might serve as living reflections of Jesus' generous love; Jesus, the suffering and serving messiah.