

Bishop's Reflection – 22nd Sunday

Last week he was praised for his great insight regarding Jesus' true identity, this week he is roundly put in his place. Last week he was appointed as Chief Steward of Jesus' kingdom and bearer of its keys, this week he is told, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me." In only a few short lines, Simon Peter watches his meteoric rise come crashing down with equal velocity. We can relate to his experience, having experienced similar rises and falls in status or fortune in our own lives.

The first part of Matthew's Gospel comes to an end with Simon Peter's declaration of faith, regarding the true identity of Jesus, the second part of the Gospel begins with the words: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." It is as if the focus and the purpose of his mission changes in the blink of an eye. Up to this point there have been miracles and successes, from now on he speaks of the price that needs to be paid.

Although Simon Peter may have stood alone in his great declaration of faith, regarding Jesus' true identity, he would have enjoyed wide support in taking Jesus aside and telling him not to speak in this way. Not only is Peter scandalized by the idea that this should happen to his Lord and Master, he is also afraid what it will do to the overall morale of Jesus' followers but the overall success of their undertaking. Newly established as Jesus' right hand man, Peter plays the part perfectly in boosting Jesus' spirits in, what can only be seen by Peter, as a moment of doubt.

But Jesus is resolute. Not unlike the three temptations in the desert, Jesus turns full face and addresses Simon Peter as Satan himself. The exact meaning and intentions of the words may escape us if we fail to understand that the word "Satan" literally means: "one who stands in opposition", and his words: "Get behind me", literally means "fall in line behind me." These same words can easily be applied to us, at times, when we protest in regards to some form of suffering that must be endured for the sake of a greater good. Following Christ's radical gift of himself, to the point of death, may seem too much for us, until we realize that the lot of the servant is no different from the lot of the Master.

For many of us, who have grown up with the expression, "pick up your cross", it may well have lost its meaning. Imagine these same words spoken for the first time to a small group of followers who associated the cross with extreme humiliation and suffering intended to break not only the body but the spirit of the sufferer. Far from a half-hearted assent to a particular world view or belief, Jesus is calling forth a total and full response that is willing to endure whatever it may take to follow Christ in his footsteps. The alternative is also very striking, when Jesus asks, "For what will it profit anyone to gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will anyone give in return for their life?" Shrouded more in fiction than in fact, Queen Victoria has been reported saying that, "I will give up my entire kingdom for the chance to breathe a little longer."

Jeremiah, in our First Reading, shows us first hand the difficulties of being conformed to the life of God. Enticed by the call of God deep within him, his efforts to reach out to his kin is met with mockery and derision. The warnings he brings fall on deaf ears. The love that God has for them is spurned at every attempt that is made. In his own small way, he shares a part of God's suffering for his people, thereby entering more fully into God's endless love for him and for us.