

In our gospel reading today we find Jesus leading the disciples on the road to Jerusalem, where he knows their faith will be tested, and much will be asked of them. At this point in his ministry, Jesus knows what lies ahead, what he and his small band of friends will soon endure. He knows that he has to prepare them, to help them understand all that he has taught them, to help them begin to put the pieces together so that they can continue his mission when he is no longer with them in the same way.

So, Jesus begins with a general question, “Who do others say that I am?” But in all honesty, Jesus wasn’t concerned with what other people thought of him. He was concerned with what the disciples thought, with what you and I, believe. So, Jesus focuses the question so that it requires a response from the heart – “Who do you say that I am?” In other words, what do I mean to you? How does your faith in me change you? Are you committed to following me even when it becomes difficult?

Jesus is inviting us to open our hearts and our minds to a new way of thinking. His question is really an invitation for us to set aside our preconceived notions of how things ought to be and to be open to letting God lead us in new directions without fear or self doubt. Jesus did not intend to become a powerful ruler that would crush the enemy and liberate the people of Israel as the disciples thought, but rather he came to liberate people from themselves, from all the clutter of self-doubt, of selfishness, anger, greed, and jealousy.

Our reading this morning from St. James emphasizes our call to be active participants in the process of salvation; to get our hands dirty for the sake of Christ. St. James tells us that faith without works is empty and useless. Think about it, faith without works is empty and useless. If our faith does not propel us to be people of love, to strive to make a difference in the lives of others, to give us the courage to speak the truth, then we are missing the very heart of the teachings and example of Jesus.

Picking up our cross means dealing with life with an open heart and an active faith. Jesus commissioned his followers, you and me, to go out and heal the broken hearted, to give sight to the blind, to cure the sick, feed the poor, to become his hands and feet. Faith is meant to lead us to be people of love in our own unique ways. We are not all called to be Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, no we are called to carry the cross in our own unique ways, by loving, by smiling, by showing

kindness to people and animals, and by respecting God's creation with an open and joyful spirit.

Carrying the cross does not mean allowing ourselves to be treated as a doormat or to be taken advantage of. On the contrary, it means being willing to take a risk by acting in love. It means finding the courage to stand up for what is right and responding not in fear or anger, but in love. My friends, the cross is going to be present in our lives, whether we want it or not, in a variety of ways – sickness, pain, economic hardship, rejection, discrimination, loneliness, failure, betrayal by someone we love, and this list can go on and on. Sometimes, our cross is small and relatively trivial, but at other times it can be overwhelming and leave us permanently scared. If the experience of suffering makes us violent, hard-hearted or closed-in on ourselves, then we cut ourselves off from God and from the healing, transforming power of grace. Willingly accepting the cross means responding to suffering and hardship with love, holding on to our faith, and trusting in hope. It means finding hope when things look hopeless, it means living with dignity and not letting ourselves become bitter or self-absorbed.

God does not thrust the cross upon our shoulders, but God puts people into our lives to help us through our darkest hours. Remember, Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus in his hour of need and there are many people like Simon of Cyrene who carry the cross with us; friends, even strangers, who sometimes give us the courage to continue on, to face the challenge, to laugh when we want to cry. We are not only called to help others carry their cross, but to let others help us as well.

We may not know what tomorrow holds, but what we do know is that God loves us and walks with us each and every step of the way. As you leave church today, think about the question posed by Jesus in today's gospel reading, "Who do you say that I am?" Spend some quiet time with God in prayer this week pondering it and let it be an invitation to deepen your commitment to follow Jesus even when the path is difficult.