

22nd Sunday OT - Matthew 16:21-27

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Denying ourselves is a lifelong practice, but the goal is to become **Christ-like**. If we want to become Christ-like, then we have to understand who Jesus Christ really is, and not just the God part, since sometimes that gets over emphasized. "We believe what we pray and we pray what we believe." That means our liturgy is important because we will believe what we pray.

God intended to save us through Jesus Christ through, his divinity **and** his humanity. Throughout Church history it seems that the pendulum swings back and forth where either Jesus' humanity is overemphasized or this divinity, usually to the detriment of the other. We are now in that in-between time where some want to over emphasize Jesus' divinity over his humanity through the Liturgy. Unfortunately, when the smoke clears, or should I say the incense, what is left? When the candles are put out and the very fancy vestment are taken off, what is left? Our plain old humanity, like Jesus walking on a dusty road to heal a blind man calling out to him.

Would it have been enough if Jesus was **incarnate**, that is became man, and **never died** for us? It seems that way to Peter. "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you."

One theologian writes that the average sermon treats Christ's death **inadequately**. It usually regards the crucifixion as an external and meritorious cause of redemption. By contrast, a theology of death should connect the death of Jesus to human existence, since in death, we are radically powerless, and by acknowledging this powerlessness, we also acknowledge the ground of all reality, namely, the holy mystery of God.

God both gives the possibility of transcendence beyond this life and invites us to surrender ourselves to the divine self, God. When we surrender ourselves to the divine self in death, we surrender ourselves to the ground of our being. In the fact of death, God appeals to us to acknowledge our source and our **goal**, which is unity with God.

So, what is God's goal for us? Hopefully it is not the longing for a **mythical heaven** that is merely the prolongation of our earthly life. Nor is it the longing for something that has not yet come. The goal of Christian life is not one that

abolishes us and absorbs us into God's absoluteness. That is what some oriental religions believe, like Buddhism.

It is a longing for something that, while the goal itself is in progress, has already left its mark on history. The goal of human life can be seen in our history already moving within its goal. That is what our liturgy should represent, or that is how we should pray what we believe. So, whenever we hope in the future, God is appealing to us. God invites us to see in our future a life that transcends our present life, a life to which there is already a reliable testimony.

We leave our liturgy and go out into the world already living our future life with God by sharing our love of God with those we meet this day and every day.

In the love of neighbor, God makes an appeal that goes beyond ourselves. God is inviting the human being to seek someone who can be loved with absoluteness, the absoluteness with which the Christian loves God. So, fundamental theology tries to show that our love for another human being expresses an implicit love and faith in Christ. Human love expresses a response to God's invitation, the invitation to realize the possibilities that God has given. God invites us to enter into a relationship of love with God's own self. By doing so, we realize the possibility of becoming one with God.

Finally, if someone says that the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, merely died in his human reality, and implicitly understands this to mean that this death did not touch God, he has only said half of the truth and has left out the really Christian truth." In Jesus' life, including his death on the cross, we find God's own destiny.

Just as Jesus' life expressed who God is, so Jesus' death expressed God as God is and wants to be in relation to us. We can speak of a death of God really and truly, in his (God's) being and in his becoming in the other (i.e., Jesus) of the world. Hence we share the destiny of God in the world. We know and have God by encountering God in the experience of death. It is the experience where God meets us in a radical way. "The death of Jesus belongs to God's self-expression." If Peter believed this he would have immediately followed Jesus through his passion and death. The only disciple that truly believed this was, believe it or not, doubting Thomas. John 11:16, "Let us go to die with him." He said this while with Jesus on the way to raise Lazarus from the dead.

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"You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my Church." That was from last week's gospel. Today's gospel we read, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me." Wow! What a difference from Rock to Satan. In one reading Peter is an Obstacle to Christ and in the other the Heavenly Father revealed to Peter Jesus' divine title.

Our we divinely inspired or are we an obstacle to Jesus Christ? This week we have several role models of Saints to choose from to help us answer that question, and at the top of the list are Saints Monica and Augustin. As you know, Saint Monica prayed for her son's conversion all her life and at the end she saw him baptized by St. Ambrose. With Augustin's conversion, the church received one of most influential saints.

At the beginning of Augustin's understanding and search for God before his baptism his main problem as a strong follower of the Manichees was their belief that there was a good God and an evil god. The evil god was sort of a lesser god or a demigod. At Augustin's time the Church's development of and the understanding in the Trinity was still not fully developed or worked out, that is three persons but one God. The saints of Cappadocia would add to that development by the 5th Century.

Peter's declaration would be quite surprising for any Jew who believed in one God, "You are the Christ, Son of the Living God." Since Christ means "the Anointed One", Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One, who was to free Israel from the Roman Occupation, sort of like the Maccabees did during the time of the Greeks under Alexander the Great. That is why Jesus' prediction of his passion and death and resurrection did not make sense, especially his resurrection, if Jesus the Christ was to free Israel militarily. I don't think any of the Jews understood God's plans.

One of my favorite prophets is Jeremiah, and the first reading is one of my favorites. "You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped." Jeremiah had thought like Peter, that God would convert Israel through the prophet Jeremiah. Unfortunately, it went from bad to worse for him when he was thrown into a cistern filled with mud and bullfrogs. Not only did Israel not listen to him, even his own family plotted to have him assassinated since his prophecies were putting them in danger from the king.

How could it get worse than that? Well, Jeremiah's prophecies came true and Jerusalem fell to the enemy. His supposedly friends kidnapped Jeremiah and dragged to Egypt where he eventually died there. Because his prophecy came true was not enough for them.

"I must suffer, die and rise again," Jesus predicted. And as Jeremiah predicted, Israel was defeated and Jerusalem was destroyed. Jerusalem also fell under the Romans as Jesus predicted. As for Saint Augustine, as he lay dying, the city of Hippo where he was bishop was being overrun by the Vandals. Eventually, Hippo and Rome would also fall to these northern pagan tribes.

Throughout history, as Augustin wrote, the battles between the two cities, the city of man and the city of God, would always be in conflict.

Monday' *Blessed Among Us*, Gertrud Luckner, wrote in answer to an interview after she was declared Righteous Among the Gentiles for her work during WWII in Nazi Germany for saving Jews and having survived imprisonment herself in a Nazi concentration camp, responded to the question, "what had led her to risk her life to save others?" And she answered,

"But it was obvious! I thought You must always comfort them. The only thing I can do is walk the way together with them. The whole thing had been so terrible—the deportations, one city after another—so that it really did not much matter anymore what happened to me."