

Becoming “real” disciples
Resources for the Homily – 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time – 12 September 2021

Readings: 1st Isa 50:5-9a; 2nd James 2:14-18; Gospel Mk 8:27-35

1. Becoming “real” (intentional) disciples. This Sunday we begin a series of seven Sunday Gospel readings from Mark’s account of the journey of Jesus and his disciples from northern Galilee to Jerusalem. Along the way Jesus gave instructions about his identity and what it meant to follow him (discipleship). Today's Gospel, relating the first of Jesus’ three prophecies of his passion, death and Resurrection, consists of two sections: the Messianic confession of Peter and Jesus’ prediction of his Passion, death and Resurrection, followed by his clear teaching on discipleship, namely, denying oneself, taking up one’s cross and following Jesus.

2. What real discipleship involves. Baby powder and Christian powder. Yakov Smirnoff (<https://youtu.be/5GK8ewRec7c>) is a Comedian from Russia. When he first came to the United States from Russia, he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip with my friend, I saw *milk powder*; you just add hot water, and you get milk. Then I saw *orange powder*; you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw *baby powder*, and I thought to myself, ‘what a country, you add water to a tin of powder and get a baby!’"

Smirnoff was joking, but many non-Catholic Christian denominations make these assumptions seriously about instant Christian transformation, leading to eternal salvation. According to this belief, when someone surrenders his or her life to Christ, accepts him as his or her personal Lord and Savior, and confesses his or her sins to him there is an immediate, substantive, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character and he or she becomes a Christian, promised eternal salvation.

Unfortunately, there is no such *Christian powder* and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. They are slowly raised through many trials, suffering, and temptations. Many are the “works” they must do in order to grow in virtue. They are saved by their faithful and lifelong cooperation with the grace of God, given for doing good and avoiding evil. Such disciples must “persevere” in order to be saved. Jesus affirms this process saying, “You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved. (Mt 10:22). In today’s Gospel, Jesus explains what his disciples should do: “*Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.*” Being Catholic is more demanding than other alternatives.

What is at stake here is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Ch 1, *Costly Grace*.

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate (p.47).

3. In the First Reading, Isaiah: This is the third of the Songs of the Servant of God (See 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12). Here the nature of Jesus is foretold, his nature and his mission. In our passage for today, we can see those three aspects of the Servant of God: 1) that he speaks well to encourage, 2) that he “suffers” for the cause of God and 3) that he experiences the presence and assistance of God. This Jesus did. This must we do to imitate Jesus.

4. Second Reading: James 2:14-18: Today’s reading, taken from the second letter of James to the Church, reminds us that suffering is not only something to be accepted but also something to be

alleviated. James tells us that our Faith in Jesus the Messiah should be expressed in alleviating others' suffering through works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual. In other words, professing faith in the Divinity of Christ and his role as our Redeemer is useless, unless we practice that faith in genuine deeds of love, mercy, forgiveness, and humble service as Jesus lived and demonstrated these qualities (See Mt 25:31-46 the vision of the Last Judgment). As Christians, we are obliged to meet the material needs of poor persons and to alleviate their sufferings. We should respond concretely to the needs and sufferings of our fellow humans. Otherwise, our faith is all talk and no action. *"Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead."* James is not refuting the Pauline doctrine of salvation by faith, but warns us that a lifeless or an un-lived faith has no power to save (v. 14) us from judgment.

5. In the Gospel: This call to sacrifice and self-denial can discourage us from being disciples. Are we willing to follow the "real" Jesus rather than the other gods of this world? The location where Jesus asks this questions is suggestive of this struggle. Peter affirms Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" in the presence of the major false gods of his world. Caesarea Philippi was a great religious center. It is the origin of the Jordan River which flows from a great spring in the ground. Hence, it is precious to Jews. In the immediate vicinity, there were fourteen temples to the Ba'als of the Syrian people. This was believed to be the birthplace of the Greek god, Pan. Caesarea Philippi was built by the Romans to honor the Caesars, believed to be gods. It was here that Jesus asked his Apostles, "Who do you say that I am?"

(See Mt 16:13-16 and William Barclay's commentary on the passage. This is also the location where Matthew has Jesus proclaiming, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church," (Mt 16:18) Many Protestant tour groups do not go to this location).

Then Jesus taught of his suffering and rejection, his death and his resurrection and the requirements to being his disciple. We too, must decide who Jesus really is and then live out our lives according to the faith that we have (See Joshua 24:14-24).

6. Let us apply this to our lives, to our decisions. 7. I commend to your reading Sherry Weddell's profound book, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*. She describes what a parish would be like if it had a number of "intentional disciples."

"Disciples pray with passion. Disciples worship. Disciples love the church and serve her with energy and joy. Disciples give lavishly. Disciples hunger to learn more about their faith. Disciples fill every formation class in a parish or diocese. Disciples manifest charisms and discern vocations. They clamor to discern God's call because they long to live it. Disciples evangelize because they have really good news to share. Disciples share their faith with their children. Disciples care about the poor and about issues of justice. Disciples take risks for the Kingdom of God (p. 81).

8. Can we become this kind of community to serve students and the university? What would God have us be like? What would God have us say? What should be the example of our lives for ourselves and others?

Example: Prolife activities and opportunities to grow in our faith and to share.

Example: Enabling awakening or working with others, especially youth.

Helping others with homework or difficult issues.

9. Let us not be deceived by our "instant" product civilization, nor by its "throw-away" convenience. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is a life-long process involving struggle and perseverance and that as we seek to care for every human being that God has created.