

Pain is a reality in our lives. And anyone who says you can make it through life in this imperfect world without any pain or suffering or disappointment is either out of touch with reality or selling you something.

Sometimes the Christian faith is presented as insurance against pain and suffering. Just believe in Jesus, go to church and follow the rules and your problems will disappear. God will wave a magic wand and “poof!”, you’ll be walking on sunshine and your life will be all rainbows.

Of course, it is only natural to want to avoid suffering. We are certainly not called to go looking for suffering for suffering’s sake. But the reality is that until we enter the perfection of eternity we are going to face sickness and pain and disappointment and, yes, death. Believing that those things don’t happen to good Christian people is not only to be blind to how things really are, but will leave us disappointed and doubting when the troubles inevitably come.

Life in Christ is not found in security. How could we ever really believe that it would be, when Christ himself was known for being with the ostracized and marginalised, and risked his reputation – and his life – to touch the untouchables.

“Those who want to save their life will lose it,” Jesus says. “Anyone who wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Where was Jesus going? Where is he inviting us to follow?

In Matthew’s Gospel just before today’s reading Jesus told his disciples for the first time that he had to go to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed.

You remember Peter’s reaction to that news? “Never! I will never let that happen to you!”

And you remember Jesus’ reaction to Peter’s objection? “Get behind me, Satan.”

Peter was tempting Jesus – like Satan had tempted Jesus in the wilderness – with taking the easy way. “Turn these stones into bread.” “Don’t go to Jerusalem.”

But Jesus was born to go to Jerusalem, to suffer for us and be in our suffering. Jesus didn’t run from suffering – from that point he turned his face toward Jerusalem like flint, knowing what awaited him there. And he invites his disciples to follow him to Jerusalem, to walk with him to the Cross.

This second Sunday of Lent is always what we might call ‘Transfiguration Sunday’. Each year we hear one of the evangelists’ accounts of the turning point - the turn toward Jerusalem, the turn toward the cross.

Six days after telling his disciples about his coming suffering and death, Jesus took three of his closest disciples up a mountain with him. There before their eyes Jesus was transformed – transfigured – his face and his clothes described by the Gospel writers as glowing and shining. Suddenly, the greatest prophets of the Old Testament – Moses and Elijah – were there, talking with Jesus.

And Peter does the first thing that comes to his mind. His impulse is one that I think we can relate to – “Let’s stay here.” “It’s safe here. Up here on this mountain there are no sick or dying or poor people needing help. We’re a long way from Jerusalem. Let’s just hang out up here and leave it all behind”

There are times when we’d just like to stay on the mountaintop, above it all. When we’d like to immerse ourselves in whatever takes the pain away for us.

The Church can be that mountaintop – and in a proper sense it *should* be. Our worship should momentarily pierce the clouds and give us a tantalizing glimpse of heaven. The Church IS an oasis of sorts, refreshing travel-weary disciples by reminding them of the resurrection and the glory that awaits them at their journey’s end. But sometimes the Church can become a place of *hiding*, of avoidance, of anaesthesia against life’s pain.

Then God the Father speaks from a cloud – “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” Those are the words we first heard when Jesus was baptized and began his ministry. And now God reaffirms Jesus’ identity as he begins the last stretch of his ministry towards Jerusalem and the cross.

“This is my beloved Son...Listen to him!”

Listen to Jesus. He knows what he has to do . . . for you...for the world.

Listen to Jesus and follow him from the mountain top back down to the mundane reality of life.

Like Peter, James and John, we have seen his majesty at some time and place in our lives and we will never be the same. But, like Jesus, we have the way of the cross to walk in our lives.

It’s messy, it’s risky, it’s painful, but we don’t go back down alone.

Jesus is with us. Jesus will *always* be with us.

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