

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B-2021)
St Patrick - Milford

Today's Gospel is a thought-provoking one. It has been said that the gospels are a two-edged sword. The word of the Lord can comfort the afflicted ... and ... afflict the comfortable. The great American Catholic Novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote: "Before grace can heal, it has to cut".

At Caesarea Philippi, St Mark tells us that these awesome words were heard: "Whoever would save his life will lose it".

"Before grace can heal, it has to cut". You know as well as I do that – we live in a society that places great emphasis on beauty, wealth, fame and popularity. In sports, business, politics and even religion, we measure success or failure according to these standards. For example, a business is successful if it generates big profits; a church is successful if it attracts a lot of worshippers; a government is successful if it performs well in the polls.

The Word of God this Sunday confronts these basic assumptions. It defines the meaning of life not in terms of personal gain, self-interest and shallow success, but rather in terms of one's sense of duty, commitment and fidelity. Ultimately, it is our ability to live life's bitter disappointments that determines our Christian discipleship.

And so, after surveying the opinion polls about him, Jesus asks the same question of his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" It is to this question that Peter gives the answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

What follows is an unexpected lesson for Peter and the other disciples. Peter is praised for recognizing the Messiah. He is called the rock.

However, the rock can be either the corner stone or the stumbling block. So long as Peter lives out the call to emulate Jesus, the Suffering Servant, he is the rock of strength. But if he refuses to be part of Christ's suffering, he becomes the rock of offense. Indeed, Peter is soon rebuked and called a stumbling block precisely because he wants to remove the cross from the mission of the Christ and Christian discipleship.

Peter has a steep learning curve on his way to be the foundation stone for the Church. He learns to carry the cross as a discipleship of trust, powerlessness, vulnerability and self-sacrifice. He learns that he must trust which is an essential quality for Christian living and witness.

In many ways, we (the Church) are living in a most challenging time. Will we recover our Mass attendance and our support of time, talent, and treasure from this pandemic? Will there be enough priests to serve the next generation of the Church? Will our children and their children keep the faith? And yet, it is not time for defensiveness or despair. Rather, it is precisely in this time of humility that we must seek to rebuild, renew and reimagine. We do so by reclaiming not the former prestige and affluence, but the essential quality for Christian living and witness.

We simply must make 'the cross of Christ' and 'the discipleship of powerlessness and vulnerable trust' the cornerstone of the Church again. Only by living authentically the call to poverty, simplicity and humility can our voice be credible and our trust regained.

This has been Pope Francis' constant challenge to the Church. The pope wants us to go to the margins, to stay close to those on the edges of life and to be that Church which is bruised, hurting and soiled because it has been out on the streets and immersed in the coalface realities. It is the Church that dares to do what Jesus did: to leave the security of its status, to accompany the most vulnerable, to minister at the liminal and precarious places of extreme human vulnerability, to empower all people to live life more fully.

“Before grace can heal, it has to cut”. Let us pray that we may be able to live faithfully and filled with trust ... knowing that God is with us ... especially during this time of the great cleansing and renewal in our Church