



Do everything calmly and peacefully. Do as much as you can as well as you can. Strive to see God in all things without exception, and consent to His will joyously. Do everything for God, uniting yourself to Him in word and deed. Walk very simply with the Cross of the Lord and be at peace with yourself — St. Francis de Sales;

February 25th Second Sunday of Lent Mark 8:31-38

Yes – Jesus does ask a great deal

Does today's Gospel strike you as confusing? It does me. We have just reached the point in the Gospel when the disciples have had a chance to witness the power, the majesty and the wisdom of Jesus; when they have come to appreciate what he has promised and the plans he has for them, and when they find themselves committing themselves to be his disciple. What does he do then? He says he is on his way to a most horrible death. And, you too are going to follow me to the grave *if* you wish to be my disciples. There is no other way.

From this point, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to the darkness of Gethsemane's garden, to the judgment hall of Pilate, to the whipping post, and to the bloody cross. Yet, on the way, as we shall see, he is still ministering to people, still healing, still comforting, still cleansing, restoring, and blessing people.

There is a twist to this. They are to deny themselves. Denying self means we renounce our natural feelings about ourselves, and this is particularly challenging in our western world today. We disavow our right to ourselves, our right to run our own lives. We are to deny that we own ourselves. We do not have the final right to decide what we are going to do, or where we are going to go.

Of course, when it is set out as starkly as that, people sense immediately that Jesus is saying something very fundamental. It strikes right at the heart of our very existence, because the one thing that we, as human beings, value and covet and protect above anything else is the right to make ultimate decisions for ourselves. We simply do not easily place ourselves under anything or anybody. We reserve the right to decide between what is God's and what is mine.

We are Christ's ambassadors in the world

This is what Jesus is talking about. It is the hard way. The steep and winding way to the Kingdom. He is not talking about giving up this or that, but about giving up our selves. As Paul restated this *You are not your own*;

you are bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a). If we are going to follow Jesus, we no longer own ourselves. Jesus Christ has ultimate rights; he has Lordship of our lives. We no longer live for ourselves; we live for Christ. Christ Jesus must be the one making those final decisions when the great issues of our lives hang in the balance. This is what Jesus means by, *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself* -- deny our self-trust, deny our self-sufficiency, deny any feeling that we are able to handle life by ourselves and run everything to suit ourselves.

It is only pride that makes us independent of God. Most of us feel that we are the master of our own fate, that we run our own lives, call our own shots, go it alone. That feeling however is our dishonest, self-delusional selves speaking. The reality is that we are not able to go it alone. We need our brothers and sisters in Christ around us, people formed into Christ's Body, empowered with the Holy Spirit and collaborating with God in the salvation of all people.

We need God within us

It is as basic as this: We all remain dependent on God for our very next breath. We truly are made in the image and likeness of God but at the same time each one of us is small, weak, and limited. Living independently of God is self-delusion. When I am conceited; when hubris and self-centredness dominate my thinking, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not a creature of God's plan for all creation. In this sense, pride is the idolatrous worship of myself.

This is what Jesus means when he says, *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.* Let him give up his rights to run his life; let him submit himself to my leadership,

to my Lordship. And this is fundamental to all discipleship. There can be no discipleship apart from the cross. Our God-given existence is to be lived out according to the plan God had in mind from the time we were *knit together in our mother's womb*.

Many people seem to believe that cross we are to carry is some kind of trial or hardship we are going through, or any kind of challenging time we must endure -- like an annoying member of the congregation, an unkind word, an unrequited attempt at friendship; it can be a request we think is too demanding, a hurt not acknowledged, forgiveness held back or a memory that will not go away. There are many things we want to claim as our crosses. *That's my cross*, we say.

But that is **not** what Jesus means. He himself had many struggles, many difficulties and trials **before** he came to his cross. So, it is not merely hardship, suffering or difficulty or trial that is the cross. The cross is something very different. The cross stood for something in the life of Jesus. It is connected with shame and humiliation. It was a criminal's cross on which he was hung. It was a place of degradation, where he was demeaned and debased. They sought to crush him entirely.

The cross is the *only* pathway to life eternal

The cross stands forever as a symbol of those circumstances and events in our experience which humble us, expose us, offend our pride, shames us, and reveals our basic weakness -- that weakness which Jesus described thus: *Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness (Mark 7:22)*. It is the cross which brings this out. It is as Jesus says. **If** we are disciples, we are to embrace any circumstance, any incident which does this to us as a moment of grace. These are the hard words of the Kingdom: Take up your cross; accept it, glory in it, cling to it; because in all things God is working for the good. Only then will we be in a place where we will be ready to receive the gift of the grace of God. That is the cross as an avenue of Grace and that is why the cross is so valuable to us. The ultimate expression of love.

The Jesus approach to life is so radically different to way the wider society sees things. The way of the world is more: *Flee! Avoid the situation*. Or, *if you can't avoid it, then strike back. Get angry, get even, offend in turn. Get upset about it*. But the word of Jesus demands more: **If** you are going to be my disciple, deny yourself, and take up your cross.

Follow Me

The next step is, "**Follow me**" which in Gospel language really means, "**Obey me**." Is it not remarkable that it takes us so long to understand disobedience is the name of the game before baptism into Christ. Obedience is certainly the name of the game after we become Christians.

Our Lord is not talking about perfection as a disciple; he is simply telling us what discipleship means, what it involves. It involves following him. It means choosing to do or say what Jesus commands us to do or say, and what he himself did. It is looking to him for the power to carry it through. This is what following Jesus means.

This is what it meant to the disciples. They obeyed him, and they were taught to look to him for whatever it took to make it possible. In the feeding of the multitude, it was Jesus who told them to feed the crowd. He commanded. They obeyed.

This is what Christianity is all about. The Christian life is following Jesus, doing what he says -- *Love your enemy*, (Matthew 5:44). *Pray for those who hurt you*, (Matthew 5:44). *Forgive those who offend you*, (Matthew 6:14-15). Those are not merely wise and helpful words; they represent the way of life our Lord is setting out before us, to which we are expected to conform in the moment when we least feel like it. When we do not feel like obeying or forgiving or praying, he tells us to do it anyway.

Be kind to the ungrateful and the selfish, Freely you have received, freely give... "Follow me" means obeying these and all of the many, many other exhortations of Scripture. Surely this is what the Lenten call to **Repent** is really all about. It is a time of grace when in the Spirit we reflect back on our actual discipleship and weight it up against all Jesus taught (Matthew 5-7), and the way Jesus lived.