

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
September 20, 2009  
Fr. Tom Elliott

## Discipleship

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

Psalm 54

James 3:16-4:3

Mark 9:30-37

There's a famous phrase that says, "Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery." While the truth of the idiom has its limitations, there is at least *some* truth in it. For example, a parent might be flattered when a child mimics their way of speaking or their mannerisms. A teacher might be flattered when a student expresses interest in becoming a teacher. A biker might modify his Honda to try to make it sound like a Harley. While these are good examples of flattery, there is much more than just flattery happening when you and I choose to imitate Jesus Christ!

At the heart of discipleship, we find God's call for us to imitate His Son, Jesus Christ. More specifically, we are challenged to imitate His suffering and death so as to share in His resurrection. Our Gospel reading today is one of three passion predictions found in the Gospel of Mark. These three predictions, which tell us of the impending suffering and death of Christ, are followed by specific teachings about how true discipleship is an imitation of Jesus, the Teacher and Master.

The first passion prediction is found in Mark 8:31-38. After Jesus explains to His disciples that He must suffer, die, and rise again, Peter rebukes Him. Peter did not understand the importance of Jesus' suffering and dying, so the author of Mark follows his rebuke with a four-fold teaching on discipleship. In other words, not only was it important for Peter and the other disciples to comprehend why *Jesus* had to suffer and die, they had to understand that they were being called to do the same. Jesus' teaching on discipleship after the first passion prediction includes the importance of our denying ourselves, losing our lives for the sake of the Gospel, knowing the value of our true selves, and never being ashamed of Christ. It is all a way for the author of Mark to remind us that a good disciple models his life after the life of his master. Since Jesus suffered and died, then there is a certain suffering and death that is expected of His disciples.

After the second passion prediction, no one makes the same mistake that Peter made after the first prediction. Jesus explained again that He was going to have to suffer, die, and rise, and Mark reports that the disciples, "did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question [Jesus]" (Mark 9:32). Despite the fact that none of the disciples commented on Jesus' prediction, Christ used the moment to correct another misconception about discipleship—discipleship is not about importance. To truly follow in the way of Christ does not lead to power, popularity, or prestige, but rather, it leads to serving others. Jesus stated, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

In the final passion prediction (Mark 10:32-34), the author of Mark lets us know that Jesus was not forced to suffer and die, but that He willingly chose to journey to Jerusalem, knowing what His arrival would mean. In verse thirty-two we read that Jesus and the disciples were "on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and *Jesus went ahead of them*. They were amazed, and

those who followed were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to him” (Mark 10:32, *emphasis mine*). Once again, Jesus used the passion prediction as an opportunity to define discipleship. Immediately following His prediction, James and John make their famous request to Jesus, “Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left” (Mark 10:37). Apparently, they did not fully absorb Jesus’ teaching in the previous chapter! Therefore, Jesus offers another teaching about the role of suffering and service in discipleship, using the image of baptism and a cup. He explains to the two brothers that if they are going to be His disciples then they will indeed suffer as He is going to suffer—“The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” (Mark 10:39).

To be a Christian—a disciple of Christ—means we must suffer and die with Him. Jesus made this unbelievably clear, not just in the three passion predictions, but throughout all four Gospels. So much so that there is no greater indication of authentic discipleship than our willingness to die to self so as to live for others and Christ! This week, let’s look for some opportunities to lay our own wills, desires, hopes, and wants aside for the sake of serving Christ in others.