

**Feb. 28, 2021  
Christ the Servant, Reston  
Lent 2  
Mark 8:31-38**

**I'm wondering what would happen if I preached this whole sermon with my back toward you. How would that look? Well, maybe the back of my head *is* better looking than my face! But I don't think you would like that. Turning one's back on another person is not socially acceptable. It is a sign of disrespect. It is a sign of insult.**

**Well, let's start this sermon by talking about back-turning. One of the things which I had never before noticed about our gospel text is that Jesus turns his back on Peter. Peter! The premier disciple! Jesus and Peter are talking. Right in the midst of the conversation Jesus literally turns around – turns his back – to Peter – and begins talking to the disciples. Let's look to see why.**

**The disciples thought they knew Jesus. Peter thought he knew Jesus. They had been over much ground together. They had started following Jesus in Galilee, had followed him north and west to the region of Tyre and Sidon, and then southeast to the Decapolis. They had witnessed Jesus preach and teach. They had seen him heal the sick. They had even seen him do miracles like feeding 5,000 people with a handful of fish and bread. They began to recognize this Jesus of Nazareth as a very special God-sent person. Some guessed Elijah, some John the Baptist. Others said that he was the messiah. Peter, though, began to realize that Jesus was the long awaited messiah. Peter becomes the first to use the term “Christ” or “Messiah” with Jesus.**

**This would be good, except that Peter was thinking in old ways about who this messiah, this Christ, might be. To Peter, the Christ would be a**

valiant victor, a mighty man, who would throw off Roman oppression and return Israel to the glory it once knew in King David's day.

Jesus needed to be truthful with his followers. Gathering them together he said to them, in effect, "No. It's not going to be like you think. The Son of man will undergo great suffering and be rejected. As a matter of fact," Jesus told them, "he will be killed."

Now, Peter does a remarkable thing. Listen! He takes Jesus aside. Now, when people take *me* aside by the elbow I know that I am about to be corrected for something. And, believe it or not, this is what Peter does with Jesus. He rebukes Jesus. "No, Jesus! The messiah is to WIN, not LOSE. The messiah is not to suffer. The messiah is not to die." Can you imagine correcting Jesus to his face?

*This* is the point at which Jesus turns toward his disciples and, in so doing, literally turns his back on Peter, and says to him – actually *says* to Peter, "Get behind me Satan." Wow! Calls Peter Satan! And then he explains. "You are setting your mind on human things. Not on divine things." Can you imagine how new and shocking that idea must have been to his disciples? The messiah would not be a winner by human standards. He would be a loser. He would not be the master of the house. He would be the servant.

Then, in turning to the disciples, he turns to role over to them as well. You, too! YOU TOO! If you want to be my followers, YOU TOO must be willing to undergo hardship and suffering. YOU TOO must be willing to take up your cross and follow me.

Remember, at this point the disciples don't know that Jesus will be killed on a cross. So, the statement is all the more mysterious. You must be willing to take up your cross and follow me. Mysterious and shocking. A

cross! A Roman instrument of torture and death. The shock value of the cross may have worn off on us who commonly use it as a piece of jewelry to hand around our necks. How would we be received if we were to wear a little hangman's noose around our neck, or an electric chair? In Jesus' day, those sentenced to death were made to pick up the cross-piece – the part on which their hands would be nailed – and carry it to the scaffolding where they were to be executed. Jesus was saying to them, "If you want to truly follow me, you must be ready to die."

Sometime I hear people use that image of bearing a cross to describe a personal experience. They have a job they don't like or a mother-in-law that's hard to put up with. And so they say, "Well, that's just the cross I have to bear." Bearing one's cross has nothing at all to do with putting up with things which come our way over which we have no control. As a matter of fact, referring to a bad job as "the cross I have to bear" is almost like taking the Lord's name in vain. It is trivializing something holy ... something divine.

When the Lord asks us to bear a cross he is asking us to turn our lives completely upside down; to begin thinking of other people as immensely more important than we are – especially those who are of a different color or nationality or economic status. He is asking us to stop living our lives for what we can GET and start living our lives for what we can GIVE. He is asking us to use our money for other people and to give our time to other people – no longer "me first" but "you first." To bear a cross means to adopt an entire lifestyle, an entire attitude, and entire way of being which GIVES to others, which gives until it hurts. Bearing a cross means being willing to suffer.

It once happened that a nameless medieval monk announced he would be preaching the next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the

shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lit a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns. Next, the two wounded hands. Then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say. He had preached on “The Love of God.

Throughout this Lenten season we need to move away from the “give something up for Lent” attitude. Giving up something we probably shouldn’t have anyway trivializes and profanes the suffering of our Lord. What we need to be doing is giving ourselves up for Lent. We need to remember the crown of thorns, the wounded hands, the marks of the spear wound. He carried his cross for us. Let us carry our crosses for others.