

In the gospel today **Jesus breaks the news that he has come to die**. It's one of the most famous passages in the gospels. Jesus and his disciples are in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked them, **"Who do you say that I am?"** It is a straight question, and he wanted a straight answer—no more hiding behind popular speculation or just an opinion. Their answer would explain just how far they understood him, how much they could commit themselves and, willing to follow him.

Of course, it was Peter who answered, **"You are the Messiah."** Then Jesus began to teach them that he must suffer, be rejected then be killed and after three days rise again. This was horrifying to his disciples as you must expect. It was Peter, of course, who began to rebuke Jesus for even mentioning the thought of him dying. Jesus sternly said to him, **"Get behind me, Satan!** You are thinking not as God does, but as humans do."

Then Jesus declares, **"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it."**

This passage ought to make us uncomfortable. **Jesus came to die—to die for us**. This is how much he loves us. In the words of Max Lucado, "Nails didn't hold God to a cross. Love did."

Jesus died for us. What do we do in response to such love? The truth is: most of us could answer .... Not much. We like Jesus. His teachings are inspiring. His miracles are exciting. But do we really want Jesus to live in us? Do we really take the responsibility seriously?

I wonder if it's even possible to speak in today's culture, this generation, about self-denial. After all, some of us grew up in the so called, **"ME"** generation. "I've got to find **myself**." I've got to do **my** own thing. I will buy only the finest. Because after all, **I'm** worth it." We place so much emphasis on self: self-satisfaction, on self-actualization, on self-protection. How could Jesus ask us to die to ourself? What's wrong about putting our self-first?

How strange these words of Jesus seem in this context: "If you wish to follow me?" Deny yourself. How out of place such words may seem in today's world?

Of course, there is a sense in which many of us learned to deny ourselves. We have seen that often times self-denial is in our interest. The self-help books all tell us that. Self-denial is the path to success. If you delay gratification, if you work hard, if you put your money into savings, if you wait to have your needs met until a time when you can afford it, if you can cut down your cholesterol and get plenty of exercise, then you can be successful. We all recognize the wisdom of that advice. To gain control of our desires—to subject them to some greater and higher goal—this is the path that leads to fulfillment.

I love what boxer Muhammad Ali once said his punishing training regimen. He said, "I hate every minute of training. But I said, 'Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.'" So, some people do gladly undergo at least some form of self-denial in order to reach their personal goal.

There is only one path that leads to real success. That is when we deny ourselves to take up the cross of Jesus. A lot of us want to know Jesus, but don't want to take the final step of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and follow him. When we look at the cross, we can't deny Jesus' unconditional love for us. And there is no true love without sacrifice. So, if we love him, what are we willing to sacrifice?

Alan Paton's novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* is set in South Africa in the days of apartheid. The headmaster of a local school finally stands up against the racist system of apartheid and quits his job. One of his friends warns him, "You know you will be wounded. Do you know that?"

The headmaster points to heaven as he replies, "When I go up there ... the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' If I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."

When you come to the end of your life, don't you wonder if Jesus will ask, "Where are your wounds? Was there nothing worth dying for?"

Fr. Michael Judge was a chaplain for the New York City Fire Department. He was known throughout the city for his ministries to not only the homeless, but to people with addictions, and even AIDS patients.

On Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, Fr. Mike Judge showed up to aid the firefighters. He was praying over the injured workers and the firefighters when debris from the collapsing building struck him in the head and killed him. At his funeral, the Rev. Mike Duffy gave the following eulogy: "And the next few weeks, we're going to have names added, name after name of people, who are being brought out of that rubble. And Michael Judge is going to be on the other side of death to greet them ... and he is going to greet them with that big Irish smile. He is going to take them by the arm and say, 'Welcome, I want to take you to my Father.' And so, he can continue doing in death what he couldn't do in life."

Fr. Michael and the headmaster in South Africa denied themselves, took up their cross and followed Christ. And because they had already died to themselves, they were willing to face death to bring the hope of God to others.

Deny yourself. Take up the cross of the Master. No other lifestyle is ultimately satisfying. No other lifestyle can permanently change the world in which we live.