

“Take up your cross, and follow me”

A gospel reflection from Brian Wigger, Pastoral Associate

Do you ever get the feeling when you hear or read the Gospel that Christ was always trying to deflate our bubble? I do. Every time it sounds like He’s going to make it easy for us, Jesus turns around and in a sentence or two suddenly makes it hard. Let me give you some examples of what I mean: *if you want to be first, make yourself last. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. If you want to follow me, pick up your cross and follow me. If you want to be happy, be poor in spirit. If you want to be rich, sell what you have and give it to the poor. If you want to be my disciples, leave your nets behind. If you want to be powerful, make yourself a servant to others. If you want to love, start by loving your enemies.*

It sounds as if Christ was a master of paradoxes. Yet all these unpleasant statements He drew from real life experiences. And He personally practiced them before He preached them. The point of all those statements, of course, is that God’s standards are not ours. You certainly wouldn’t expect a Messiah, a Savior, to have to suffer violence and be killed, would you? Peter certainly didn’t. And most of us would not have written the script of the Messiah’s life that way. But Peter was scolded because he was molding God’s action in history the way he, Peter, wanted things to go. But God goes His own way – and often against our grain.

It’s tempting for any of us to want to mold religion the way we think it should go. Many people are obviously doing exactly that these days. Jesus dealt squarely with the realities of suffering and spoke of self-denial and inner discipline, death and rejection. It was hardly a religion of convenience.

Religion is life. It lives with the hard knocks of life. It does not cover over the unpleasant doses of hardship that life can dole out. It doesn’t always have to be a valley of tears, but it’s realistic enough to know that God chose a crown of thorns to mark His Kingship rather than a crown of roses. And the same thing holds true for every Christian.

The Mass is best a sacrifice when it is not only memorializes the one sacrifice of Jesus, but even more powerfully when it collects the personal sacrifices that people make each week and bring with them to Church. It’s not just the one cross, but a whole sea of smaller crosses which people bear within their bodies that makes this Catholic – universal – faith not an easy faith, but a saving faith. Faith needs works, not soft words. The Cross is the difference between a Christian and a do-gooder.

