

My friends in Christ, in today's Gospel passage from Saint Mark, after Jesus confirms Saint Peter's bold proclamation that He, Jesus, is "the Christ," the Lord then launches into what is going to happen to Him precisely *because* He is the Christ; He tells them that He "must suffer greatly, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days."

And soon after this – after Jesus describes what it will cost *Him* in order to accomplish *His* God-given mission here on Earth – He then tells of the cost of discipleship for *all* who want to be with Him in order to fulfill *their* God-given purpose, *too*. "Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me."

And so, the theme for today is the cost of discipleship. And as usual, Jesus goes first, leads by example, and then bids us follow; He shows us *first* what accomplishing the Father's perfect will is going to cost *Him* (and the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah given us today foreshadows this), and *then* He invites us to come after.

And notice that He does not *impose* upon us that we follow; He only *proposes*.... But He *does* say that *if* we want to be with Him, then *this* is what we are going to have to do. Of course, we can always choose *not* to be with Him and so be spared the excruciating cost...and, sadly, many people, in fact, end up doing this.... But if we *do* choose, in the end, that we *do* want to be with Him...then there *is* a cost.... If I want to *eat* the steak, then first I must *buy* the steak. If I want to get to Wazzu to watch me some Cougar football, then first I must *drive* there. Simple, basic *costs* for these simple, basic *wants*.... Just so, if I *want* to be with Jesus, then first I must pay the *cost* in order to do so. If I want to ride the roller coast, after all, then I need to buy a ticket – pure and simple.

And sometimes, yes, the cost *is* excruciating; we must "take up [our] cross," and the cross is excruciating – *literally!* The Latin root for that English word "excruciating" is *ex crucis*: "from, or of, the cross." And *sometimes*...the cost of discipleship literally is life itself.

This weekend, of course, marks the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. And I wonder how many people know this...but the first official fatality of 9/11 was a Catholic priest; he was a Franciscan priest named Father Mychal Judge who was serving as chaplain to one of the first firefighter crews to have arrived on the scene. When that South Tower of the World Trade Center finally collapsed, Father Judge was in the North Tower trying to help the people who were trapped inside to get out, while also administering the Last Rites for any of the dying whom he found. The South Tower then collapsed, hurtling debris into the North Tower, and Father Judge was struck in the head, even while he was praying, “Jesus, please end this right now! God, please end this!” His body was found by some of the firefighters of his own unit and was carried out by four of them in something of a solemn procession. I have a picture of this on a vocations promotional poster that was published by our Diocese in the year when I entered Bishop White Seminary. The caption on that poster says: “Fear nothing. Give everything. Be a priest.” Father Mychal Judge is registered officially as Victim #0001.... Yes, sometimes the cost of discipleship *literally* is life *itself*.

Now for myself when I was near the end of my seminary journey and I was within weeks of being ordained to the transitional diaconate, I prayed a Holy Hour in the seminary’s chapel with the exclusive intention of discerning and asking the Lord to show me what were those things in my life that potentially could hinder my holy desire and effort to give a whole-hearted “yes” to Him as His priest. I had already accepted that the priesthood certainly would be my personal expression – and indeed the very embodiment – of my own discipleship of Him as a Catholic Christian. But then, I was aware also that there were some things of mere earthly life that were *definitely* keeping me back from a full-fledged, no-holds-barred discipleship of my Lord and my God.... In other words, that Holy Hour was when I knew that I *seriously* needed to reflect upon the cost of discipleship.... And so, I asked the Lord, if He were to invite me to give up something *forever* – *anything* – so that I may know, love, and serve *only* Him...to reveal to me the most *excruciating* thing of all for me to let go.

And as it happens there were *four* such things; and in the end, I needed lots...and *lots*...of intense prayer and spiritual direction *finally* to be able to let go of what I now refer to as “the four last things” of my priesthood. (And what exactly those four last things *are*...is a conversation for another time.)

Now, thanks be to God, Jesus has yet to ask me to give up *any* of those four last things, but the point is that I was able to let go of them in my heart and so be detached from them such that *if* God ever *does* end up asking me to let them go, I would be able to do so without hesitation.... For the cost of discipleship is thus.

I would challenge each of you to take time in prayer each day this week: what might *possibly* be holding you back from embracing a full-fledged, no-holds-barred, whole-hearted discipleship of Jesus Christ? If Jesus were to ask you, right here and right now, to give something up, what would be the hardest thing for you to give up, and why? And what would it take for you finally to be able to let it go – that one precious thing...that person, that place, that thing, that treasure, that activity, that lifestyle – *whatever* it is? What *is* that one precious thing...and *could* you let it go if God asked?

Now...in my short time here so far as pastor, having just begun my third year back in July, I can observe already an inspiring and truly heroic progress on the part of *many* of you who even now have begun this pilgrim’s journey of faith and who are striving to continue growing in your personal embrace of Catholic Christian discipleship. One young woman for example, who had been visiting me for spiritual direction, has discovered her vocation to the consecrated religious life and now has entered the convent. A young man who has been seeing me for spiritual direction has discovered a calling from God to enter the seminary next fall where he will continue to discern a possible calling to the priesthood in that more structured setting. Another young man who had been seeing me for spiritual direction has since discovered definitively that his God-given calling is to Holy Matrimony, and he has met his future-bride, and they are now married.

I have observed parishioners here starting up their own Bible Study groups so as to partner with fellow parishioners in a joint endeavor to grow in faith and discipleship. I have observed new groups of prayer and faith-sharing spontaneously begin – Suzie in the parish office can barely keep up scheduling our church meeting rooms for all of these groups! I have observed entire *families* of parishioners launching to new heights, ratcheting it up to a whole new level – and I am convinced that I am completely surrounded by living, breathing, walking, talking *saints*!

The Lord's Gospel challenge to us to consider seriously the cost of discipleship already has been answered (challenged *accepted!*) so that here at Saint Mary, the average Catholic Christian is *not* some CEO Catholic, *not* some faith-is-only-for-Sundays Catholic, *not* some lukewarm, milquetoast, apathetic “*m'eb*” Catholic...but active, deliberate, and intentional *disciples* of Jesus Christ *veritably* on the same high level as the Apostles *themselves*!

May it be, then, that we keep the train rolling, so to speak...that we *keep* growing, together, as disciples of Jesus Christ...that always and everywhere, we *ourselves* will pray and discern the cost of discipleship and that we will accompany others in doing so...that in the end, no matter the cost, we will *all* of us find it to be *more* than worth it because nothing less than the Lord Himself and life eternal is what we will gain for having paid the cost... And at the end of days, may it be that all of this will have been accomplished for the salvation of souls and the glorious majesty of God.