

24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – B; Sept. 15th 2024
Isaiah 50: 4-9; James 2: 14-18; Mark 8: 27-35

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

We don't know for sure, what the expectation of the twelve men was, when they decided to follow Jesus. No doubt, initially they considered him as a newly emerging rabbi. Seeing his miracles they thought that he was a wonder worker. The rise of new rabbis was very common in Palestine at that time. The 12 men were excited being chosen by a rabbi as they were outcaste in the society. The rabbis were particular to choose only men with very high social standing. But, on the other hand, Jesus chose four fishermen, a tax collector and even a revolutionary (Zealot) to be his future apostles.

Today's gospel shows that even Jesus was curious to know how people recognized his identity. So first he asked the disciples what the opinion of the people was. He asked them, "*Who do the people say that I am?*" It was clear from the feedback of the disciples that the people never considered him as anyone beyond a prophet. So he threw a personal question to them, "*Who do you say that I am?*" It is really amazing to notice that *without any hesitation Peter could acknowledge Jesus to be the Christ – means the Messiah*. As Jesus didn't deny it, the disciples got excited. According to the Jewish concept the Messiah would be the one who would liberate the Palestinians from the Roman reign and rule over them. Naturally, these men dreamed to be in high ranking positions in the new kingdom Jesus would establish. But the immediate prediction of Jesus of the imminent crucifixion and death was a bomb shell in the disciples' camp. In a way, in no time all their dreams and ambitions shattered there itself.

It is clear that Peter and companions didn't understand the four '**Servant Songs**' of **Isaiah in which the Messiah is pictured as a suffering servant, not as a political and material king**. In today's first reading we have just listened to the third Servant Song, where the role of the suffering Servant is clearly depicted. During the post resurrection period when the disciples themselves were undergoing the persecution everywhere, they understood the meaning of **cross and suffering and what the cost of discipleship was**. Perhaps only in that context they understood the demand of Jesus, "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*" (Mk. 8: 34). The disciples wished one thing and they got just the opposite. The challenge to Peter reminds us of the words of Isaiah "**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.**" (Is. 55:8). Jesus too accuses Peter for thinking just as human beings. Jesus says, "*You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.*"

In the eyes of the world the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus don't have any meaning. Suffering is nothing but a tumor in the society and the modern world does not give any value to it. We all want to live a comfortable life free from sufferings. The medical science is trying to give a maximum pain free life to man and give him long life on earth. Today the whole effort of man is to save the life in the material world. But Jesus says, **“Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”** Whatever we do, one day our life should end in the world. But the one who takes up his/her suffering and follow Jesus will find the real life. According to the teaching of Jesus only through suffering and sacrifice one will be able to achieve something in this world as well as the world to come.

When Jesus asks his followers to take up their cross and follow him, he doesn't mean that they have to create cross for themselves; rather Jesus knows that living in this imperfect world, one cannot escape the cross. **There are hundreds of crosses scattered around us in the form of sickness, frustration, depression, rejection, misunderstanding, humiliation, loss of our dear ones, financial loss, you name them.** Among these multiple crosses, one belongs to me and I have to pick that and follow Jesus to the mount of Calvary.

Finally, when you and I hang on our crosses patiently and enduringly, no doubt, Jesus will be hanging with us on the other side of our cross. But the reward for enduring any suffering is nothing less than the eternal life. The very Peter, who persuaded Jesus to run away from suffering, rejoiced when he was dragged to the Sanhedrin and flogged and finally he too was crucified head down. St. Paul who had to suffer a lot for the sake of the gospel speaks about suffering in Colossians, *“I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his Body.”* The great Christians consider suffering as the participation in the suffering of Jesus on the cross and they know that there is no crown without the cross.