

It's a bit irreverent, and certainly not scriptural, but I have this mental picture of the disciples. It's several years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The disciples are all together. They are talking about the good old days, laughing, teasing, and reminiscing the way friends who have shared a life changing experience often do. Then one of them looks at Peter and says, "Hey Satan, tell us about the day you rebuked Jesus!" Another joins in, "Yeah, how'd that work out for you?" Another, "What were you thinking about, Peter?" Peter begins to speak, "You know I just didn't like the whole suffering and dying thing. I didn't get it. That's not what I signed up for. That's not who I thought the Messiah would be." The others quieten down recalling the day like it was yesterday. They begin to realise that Peter didn't say anything they weren't thinking.

Maybe Peter didn't say anything we haven't thought or even wanted to say. Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than what most of us probably want. When another's reality and vision begin to conflict with and overtake our own we rebuke. We take them aside to "enlighten" them, help them understand, show them the error of their ways. That's all Peter did.

And if we are really honest haven't we, at some point, disagreed with Jesus, asking why he doesn't do what we want? Why won't he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

If he can cast out the demons and silence the crazy guy in the synagogue surely he could silence the voices that drive us crazy.

If he can heal Peter's mother-in-law why not those we love?

If he can cleanse the leper why does our life sometimes leave us feeling unclean and isolated?

If he can make the paralytic walk why are so many crippled by fear, dementia, or addiction?

If he can calm the sea surely he could calm the storms of our world. Yet they rage on; violence, war, poverty, pandemics.

If he can keep Jairus' daughter from dying why not our children, our friends, our loved ones?

If he can feed 5000 with a few fish and pieces of bread why does much of the world go to bed hungry?

I have wondered about these things. I have been asked these kind of questions. I know some people who have lost faith and left the Church over these things. These are our rebukes of Jesus. He is not being or acting like we want. Sometimes his words challenge and shock us. Maybe we're not so different from Peter.

Just a few verses before today's gospel Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter names him as "the Christ," the Messiah, the Anointed one of God. Jesus is the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one for whom Israel has waited, the one who was supposed to restore God's people. Peter is right and yet he also does not understand.

Peter has an image of what the Messiah is supposed to do and who the Messiah is supposed to be. We all have our own images and wishes about who Jesus is and what he should do. All is well when Jesus is casting out demons, healing the sick, preventing death, and feeding the multitudes. We like that Jesus. We want to follow that Jesus. He is our Lord and Saviour.

Jesus will not, however, conform to our images of who we think he is or who we want him to be. Instead, he asks us to conform to who he knows himself to be: the one who "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." He sets a choice before us. It is a choice we each have to make. Again and again the circumstances of life set that choice before us.

We either *choose ourselves* and *deny Jesus* or we *deny ourselves* and *choose Jesus*. "If any want to become my followers," he says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Self-denial is the beginning of discipleship.

I suspect that is not what Peter had in mind when Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." I wonder if that is what we had in mind when we came to "church" today, or what we thought about when we had our children baptised, or how often we understand and practice our faith as daily self-denial.

Jesus' words are hard and his way is extreme. Surely God did not covenant with his people and bring them out of Egypt into the Promised Land only to say, "Now let it all go." The Messiah is supposed to offer security, protection, and put Israel back on top. Faith in Jesus, Peter is learning, is not about the elimination of risks, the preservation of life, and the ability to control. Instead, Jesus asks us to risk it all, abandon our lives, and relinquish control to God. That is what Jesus is doing and he expects nothing less of those who would follow him.

The way of Christ, self-denial, reminds us that our life is not our own. It belongs to God. It reminds us that we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us. It is about God. There is great freedom in knowing these things. We are free to be fully alive. Through self-denial our falling down becomes our rising up, losing is saving, and death is resurrection.

As long as we believe our life is about us we will continue to exercise power over others, try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices. Self-denial is not about being out of control or powerless. It is about the choices we make.

Jesus chose to give in a world that takes, to love in a world that hates, to heal in a world that injures, to give life in a world that kills. He offered mercy when others sought vengeance, forgiveness when others condemned, and compassion when others were indifferent. He trusted God's abundance when others said there was not enough. With each choice he denied himself and showed God was present.

At some point those kind of choices will catch the attention of and offend those who live and profit by power, control, and looking out for number one. They will not deny themselves. They will respond. Jesus said they would. He knew that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes. It happens in every age for those who choose the path of self-denial. When it happened for Jesus he made one last choice. He chose resurrection over survival. We too, have a choice!

Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers...." What choice are you going to make?