

For the last several weeks, we've been following Jesus as he journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem to face his final days. As we heard last week, as soon as he gets to Jerusalem, he encounters opposition from the religious authorities, as they attempt to trap him into an untenable position so he can be labeled a heretic and dispensed with. Today, the scene has shifted to the Temple grounds, and Jesus overhears people raving about how beautiful the temple is, blah, blah, blah, and something inside Jesus snaps. All of this, Jesus tells them, every little bit of it, is going to be wiped out, destroyed, thrown down. In other words, stop focusing on the superficial, stop congratulating yourselves on how well you've boxed up God, and recognize that hard times are ahead. Understandably, the people react with horror, and immediately seek details. When? How? Although Jesus doesn't give them a straight answer, the reality is that less than 40 years later, the Romans respond to a Jewish uprising by utterly destroying the temple and throwing down every stone, just as Jesus foretold.

The theme of today is a harsh one, alas. It is not about love and peace and reconciliation, it is about the cost of discipleship. We live in a so-called Christian nation, which is both a blessing and a curse. As a blessing, we can easily live our lives as Christians and very rarely, if ever, face the cost of that claim. As a curse, the same applies! If we never face any opposition, our faith becomes merely a label that can wash off in a sprinkle, never mind a storm. As is true throughout history, one only sees the cost of discipleship played out on the margins of society. Here's an example from the prison – on the last Kairos weekend, an older man named Fredo, who is from Puerto Rico, approached me and asked to speak to me. Fredo told me that he was in danger. I asked why and he said that the local Hispanic gang leader in the yard had asked him if was indeed “loyal” to the Hispanic gang. Fredo said yes, of course. The gang leader said that he had to prove himself by stabbing a white prisoner. Now realize that Fredo is 78 years old and in a wheelchair. “What if I don't do this?” asks Fredo. “Then we stab you,” is the response. Fredo was clearly upset – this little exchange had just happened an hour ago. I pulled in one of the yard pastors and asked for some advice. He suggested that we take Fredo to the Yard sergeant for a solution. So we did.

The sergeant listened, but clearly did not believe Fredo. He told Fredo that if he really felt in danger, he would put him in the Administrative Segregation Unit, aka solitary confinement or “the hole,” as the prisoners called it. Fredo blanched, said that he really didn't want to go in the hole, so

the sergeant presented him with a form that stated that Fredo, even though he had a complaint, did NOT feel in danger, please sign here. Fredo reluctantly signs the form. There was nothing else any of us could do but pray for him, so we did. The next morning, Saturday, Fredo came to the retreat looking tired and haggard. He was preoccupied all day, but got through it just the same. He left us that evening, after again being prayed over. Sunday arrived, and so did Fredo. To my surprise, he looked well rested and was smiling. “What happened?” I asked. He told me that Saturday evening the gang leader had come up to him again in the yard and told him that Fredo had to appear before the gang council. Fredo said to him, “I’ve joined another gang.” “What gang?” came the surprised reply. “The gang of Jesus Christ!” declared Fredo staring defiantly at the gang boss. The boss looked hard at Fredo for a moment and said, “Okay, I respect that choice, but understand, we will be watching you very carefully. If you slip up in your walk, we will make you pay!” And then he walked away. So tell me, do you think that Fredo will slip up? I sincerely doubt it!

Fredo’s experience has really made me think. Would I give up my life, risk everything, for the sake of Jesus Christ? Would I walk the martyr’s path? I would hope that I could walk that path, that I could choose Christ if confronted by an anti-Christian fanatic, even at the cost of my life. But am I willing to stand up for Christ when the stakes are not so high? When the cost may be ridicule or an angry response? Ironically, it’s easier to support Christ when everything’s on the line! But the danger in being non-committal with little challenges is that our faith weakens with each non-response, with each wishy-washy lukewarm answer, with each failure to speak. Our faith shifts to the point where my heroic claim to follow Jesus to the end rings hollow and insincere. This is our danger today.

Our Christian walk has become so secularized, so watered down, that there is no longer any appreciable difference between those who claim to be Christian and those who claim no religion. This is seen in politics, in giving, in volunteerism, in military service, in every aspect of life. Being Catholic is not a distinguishing characteristic. But wait, you’ll say, I’m different – I’m sure of it. I’m here on Sunday. I give money, I try to live a good, ethical life. I even go to confession, at least once in a while! Doesn’t that count for anything? Yes, it does. But let’s take a harder look. Answer these questions:

1. Is my prayer life different from five years ago? Do I pray more, or less?
2. Do I attend Mass more frequently or about the same?
3. How is my Catholic life lived out? Do I volunteer in more areas than before?
4. Am I learning more about the Catholic faith? What was the last Catholic book I read? What was the last Bible study I attended?
5. Has my giving to Catholic causes gone up, or down, or just the same (which means down due to inflation)?
6. Has anyone come to the faith because of my direct or even indirect action? Name them.

Here's the key point. If there's no difference between my life five years ago and now, then I'm not growing in my faith! That may sound harsh, but to put it in Jesus' terms, the cost of discipleship has decreased for you. What was once *amazing* grace has become *cheap* grace. Jesus Christ preached one thing, over and over, *metanoia*, a Greek word that means a complete turnaround in thinking, or, as often translated, *repentance*. If following Jesus is no longer transformational, then you've stopped following Jesus. But here's the good news – he hasn't stopped following you! Think of the invitations you've received over the past five years to follow Jesus more closely. They have come in many forms, from junk mail to personal invitations, from homilies to pleas, from politics to entertainment. Who have you been listening to? Who or what has been infringing on your relationship with Jesus? What is stealing you away?

Coming back, *metanoia*, will cost something. How much is a matter of how far apart you are. Jesus' words today ring true: "You will be hated by all because of my name, but not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives." So, brothers and sisters, let's persevere!