

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A man arrives at the Pearly Gates and asks St. Peter, "How do I get into heaven?" St. Peter says, "You need 1,000 points." The man responds, "I've been a good Christian all my life. I've gone to church every Sunday, helped the poor, and gave generously." St. Peter says, "Great! That's one point." The man, surprised, says, "One point? Well, I started a ministry for the homeless and raised a lot of money." "Excellent! Another point." The man, now sweating, says, "At this rate, only by the grace of God will I get in!" St. Peter smiles, "That's 1,000 points—come on in!"

Dear Friends,

Today's reading help us to reflect on the cost of discipleship in our lives. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus asked two questions about His identity. The incident occurred at Caesarea Philippi, presently called Baniyas, twenty-five miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. This city was founded by King Philip, the son of Herod the Great, to perpetuate his own memory and to honor the Roman Emperor Caesar. It was situated on a beautiful terrace about 1150 feet above sea level on the southwest slope of Mount Hermon overlooking the Jordan Valley. The city was a great pilgrimage center for pagans because it held temples for the Syrian god Baal, the Greek god Pan, the Roman God Zeus, and a marble temple for the emperor Caesar.

While at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus realized that if the apostles did not know who He really was, then the entire Messianic Mission of ministry, suffering and death would be useless. Hence, Jesus decided to ask a question in two parts.

The Messiah We Want vs. The Messiah We Need

Peter, like many Jews of his time, was expecting a victorious, political Messiah who would liberate Israel from Roman oppression. Jesus, however, reveals a different type of Messiah—one who will suffer, be rejected, and ultimately die on the cross before rising again. Peter couldn't reconcile the image of a suffering Messiah with his expectations of glory and triumph.

This tension still exists today. Many of us, at times, may want a "Messiah" who brings immediate solutions, comfort, and worldly success. But Jesus teaches that following Him involves embracing the cross—suffering, sacrifice, and self-denial. The path to eternal life is not about avoiding pain or challenges but transforming them through the power of God's love.

In the second reading, James gives us a direct message about what it means to live as a disciple. Faith without work is dead. This isn't to say that we earn salvation through our actions, but genuine faith naturally produces good works. A faith that does not move us to love, service, and sacrifice is a faith that is incomplete.

Jesus' call to take up our cross daily is a call to live out our faith in concrete ways. It's not enough to simply profess belief in Christ. Our lives must reflect His values—compassion for the poor, mercy for the sinner, and love for the outcast.

Jesus doesn't sugarcoat the demands of discipleship. He clearly says: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Denial of self means putting aside our personal desires, ambitions, and comforts when they conflict with God's will. It means saying "no" to selfishness and "yes" to God's plan, even when it's difficult or inconvenient.

Taking up the cross does not mean seeking out suffering for its own sake, but rather embracing the sacrifices and challenges that come with living faithfully in an imperfect world. It's about standing for truth in the face of opposition, loving those who are difficult to love, and serving those in need even when it costs us.

Jesus' question to Peter is the question He asks each of us today: "Who do you say that I am?" Our answer is not just in words but in how we live our lives. Do we recognize Him as the suffering Messiah who calls us to follow Him in faith, love, and sacrifice? Are we willing to take up our cross, trusting that in losing our lives for His sake, we will find true life?

As we reflect on today's readings, let us ask for the grace to embrace the path of discipleship, to put our faith into action, and to follow Christ wherever He leads, knowing that the way of the cross leads to the joy of resurrection.