

Today's Gospel reading follows the one we read last Sunday which recounted the great moment when Peter affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, "the Son of the living God." Jesus turned to Peter and declared him to be the rock and promised him the keys to the kingdom. It is a moment that is truly historic in its implications. Today's Gospel reading is something else. In terms of space and time, the Gospel readings from last week and today lie side by side. But in spirit, they are different worlds.

Last week, Peter confessed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Here, he takes the Lord aside and tries to tell Him what to do. Last week, Jesus called Peter the "rock." This week, Jesus calls him a tempter and tells him to leave.

These contrasting events took place within moments of each other. What happened? The answer is not hard to find. Jesus confronted His disciples with the fact of the cross. Matthew explains it like this: "Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and to suffer greatly there at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.

Now we can understand the shift in mood. The cross is easily the most challenging truth about the Christian faith.

The cross shows us the utter seriousness of sin. It displays vividly what sin can do to people, what it did to those who crucified Jesus, how sin so twisted their souls out of shape that they could engage in such brutality. It shows what sin does to us, how it twists our life out of shape. It shows what sin does to the Lord, how our rebellion can distance us from the Lord and can cause pain to the very heart of God.

The cross shows us that the evil of sin is real, as real as the wood of the cross. What it did to Jesus' body on the cross, sin does to every human life it touches. When we tend to trivialize sin or even make it a subject of situation comedy humor, the cross reminds us of the seriousness of sin. Sin is deadly serious.

A second reason why we don't like to be confronted by the cross is because it shows us that true love is sacrificial. A married couple promise to love each other like that, people in the religious life promise to love the Lord and His Church like that, and as Christians we are called to love each other like that. When we are tempted to descend into sentimentality, the cross reminds us that true love is defined not by how we feel but by what we give. Is our love like the love we see on the cross?

A third reason why we don't like to be confronted by the cross is because Jesus teaches us that the cross is the only way to deeper life, to eternal life. Many prefer the easy listening of modern Christian rock music as a way of showing our commitment to Christ. It is one thing to look at a crucifix and to meditate on Christ's love for us. It is another thing to confront the crosses in our life.

Like Peter, we don't want the cross. We want to bypass it, but we cannot. Whether our cross is emotional, financial or personal, the Lord says that carrying the cross is the way we follow Him. It is how our discipleship becomes real and unique. We all would love to find a way to bypass the cross in our life but the cross is the only way to an honest and real embrace of life, to depth of soul and to full discipleship.

Everybody in the world has a cross. The issue is what we do with that cross. Do we deny it, rebel against it, kick it? Or do we take it up and follow the Lord with it, and in doing so come to profound spiritual maturity? The Lord teaches us the great truth of the Christian faith that the cross is our way to life, an honest life, real life, to eternal life. It is a school for every person.

It teaches us the truth that sin damages everything it touches. It teaches us that true love is sacrificial. It teaches us the truth about discipleship, that to follow Christ is to follow Him not in spite of the cross we have but through it.