

22ND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - 2002
“A stumbling stone”

As Paul Harvey would say, *“Now, for the rest of the story.”* IN last week’s gospel, Simon Peter had just identified Jesus as *“the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* For this, Jesus called him *“blessed.”* And to add to this moment of triumph, he said to Simon, *“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”* And then, like frosting on the cake, Jesus gave to Peter, the rock, the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the authority to bind and to loose. For his great, though brief performance, its like Peter had just won the Nobel Prize for insight.

As Catholics, we feel so good about this passage because it is central to our understanding of Peter as the first pope. It speaks to the authority that will be given to the church, to bind, to loose, to teach and to guide. Peter and the rest of the disciples hadn’t expected to receive such awesome powers. It caught them totally off guard, but not as off guard as what Jesus was about to say. His next words would alter dramatically their expectations of Him.

I must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.

It was unthinkable to Peter and the others. Instead of conquering the enemies of Israel, Jesus himself would be conquered. He would be killed. So Peter rebukes Jesus. And “rebukes” is the same word Jesus uses when he rebukes demons. It is strong and forceful. *“God forbid, Lord! No such thing will ever happen to you.”* And in response, Jesus not only ignores Peter’s Nobel Prize for insight, but says, *“Get behind me Satan! You are an*

obstacle to me.” We Catholics usually ignore telling this part of the story. But we should tell it. We must tell it.

Peter the “*rock*” has now become Peter the “*stumbling stone!*” Jesus’ mission is clear. His future is set and it is the way of the cross. And Peter is trying to trip him up. “*You can’t go there, Jesus. Messiahs don’t lose. They win. They defeat their enemies. Shame on you for talking so foolishly!*” While Peter correctly identified Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” it is now time for Jesus to unfold the meaning of those titles. And when he does, the understanding of “Messiah” will be changed forever. It is not necessary that a Messiah destroy his enemies to be victorious. It only requires that he be faithful to the God who sent him. It only requires that he live in the Spirit that he has from the Father. And it will become clear as this amazing story unfolds, that living in that Spirit means to love, no matter the cost.

And, as if anticipating the disciple’s desires for power, glory and victory, what Jesus says next sends them reeling.

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

We have to be careful here. The cross that Jesus is talking about is not a misfortune or some suffering that comes into our lives, like an illness or accident of some sort. We do not choose them. Jesus is telling us to take up our cross. He is asking us to do something that will become the cross for us. And that something is to choose to follow him and his way, which is the way of love that leads to the cross. In other words, he is asking us to follow the way of love no matter where it will lead us. He is asking us to love selflessly, to give of ourselves so others can live. And the irony is this: It is

by giving ourselves away in loving service to others that we will find our best selves.

A mother was talking on the phone to her son who was away at college. He was disgruntled with life. It wasn't going anywhere and he was unhappy. Knowing that he had been raised to be of service to others in one way or the other, his mother asked him, "*What have you been doing for others lately?*" There was a long, silent pause. Then the son said, "*Nothing.*" "*Maybe that's your problem,*" she said. They didn't need to have that same conversation again. Denying self is more profound than performing daily acts of mortification. It will mean stopping the insanity of believing that the world is about "**me**" to accepting that the world is about "**us,**" and how we live with one another.

Whoever thinks that being a follower of Jesus is about power, glory, prestige or material security is grossly mistaken. Discipleship is about transformation, which calls us to let go of selfishness to enter into a way of life animated by the Spirit of Jesus. In other words, discipleship is about living in union with Jesus. And that is more than just being in the state of grace. It is about living openly the way of love not counting the cost.

STORY: NO OTHER PLAN

A story is told that describes Jesus returning to heaven after his sojourn here on earth. The angels all gathered around Jesus to find out how things went and what had happened on earth. Jesus explained to the angels how he had lived among the people, shared his teachings, expressed his love, showed his compassion; how he had died on the cross to atone for humanity's sins, was resurrected from the dead to declare that the new kingdom was at hand, and how he unleashed the Holy Spirit.

When he finished telling his story, Michael the Archangel asked the Lord, “*What happens now?*”

Jesus answered, “*I left behind a handful of faithful men and women. They will tell the Story! They will express the love! They will teach! They will be compassionate! They will give themselves in service to others! They will work for justice. They will spread the kingdom!*”

“*But what if they fail?*” asked Michael. “*What then will be the plan?*”

Jesus answered Michael by saying, “*There is no other plan!*”

Yes, we are the Church founded on Peter, the rock. But it is our responsibility, in the context of our lives, to spread the good news of God’s truth to the world; to bring his love and compassion to bear upon those who are broken, forgotten, alone and in need. It is our responsibility to speak the values of justice for all people, and to follow the way of love wherever it may lead us. There is no other plan to change the world, to bring it the joy and the peace that God wants for all his children. When it is all said and done, we will stand before the Lord, and it will not matter if we have used to correct words. What will matter is whether or not we have lived the words correctly.

May this Eucharist continue the transformation of our hearts.