

20th Sunday C August 17, 2025 Greenwich

I finished my retreat last weekend with a quick trip to Boston. I knew I was in Boston when someone asked me about my khakis, and they were not referring to my tan trousers, but to the fob for my automobile!

Oscar Wilde, the wit and dramatist once wrote, “Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things one never discerned before.”

Each of our readings offers a dramatic picture of suffering, the cost of being faithful to God and to the demands of God's reign. That willingness to pay the price reveals precisely who is the faithful disciple.

In the first reading, Jeremiah is thrown into the cistern, the well, and is left to the cold, the mud, darkness, and isolation. In my homily three weeks ago, I referred to this passage and invited you to pay attention and listen for it.

The second reading from Hebrews describes Jesus as enduring the cross, heedless of its shame.

In the Gospel, Christ predicts that families, the very foundation of society, would be split asunder on account of Him.

The language he uses is apocalyptic: We will be baptized---plunged--- drowned in the suffering he will undergo.

We will be seared by the fire which he will cast upon the earth.

Who can endure such sayings? Many of his followers couldn't.

At first, they were agog with enthusiasm, when he healed the sick, multiplied the loaves and fish, drove out evil spirits, and showed up the religious authorities.

But when he began to talk about taking up the cross, and forgiving others, and turning the other cheek, and laying down his life, then suddenly folks remembered they had other places to go, other things to do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor murdered by the Nazis, warned against cheap grace: you know, the easy benediction, the facile assumption that God is always nice and understanding and rather tolerant.

But Jesus did not die on the cross to be nice, or to make us be nice. The cost of discipleship is paid in sweat and tears and blood,

and long hours of hanging on
when you have to live with loneliness, and insecurity,
and doubt,
with only occasional glimpses of grace.

We don't like such ambiguity. So, we try to tame God, to reduce God and fit God into our plans and our system and our way of seeing things.

We try to channel the raging waters of baptism into a few drops which we can sprinkle or dip into;

we try to reduce the purifying fire of the Spirit to the smoldering wick of a Paschal candle;

we try to contain the demands of the cross on our shoulders by wearing a bit of jewelry around our neck.

So, our God, again and again, has to break into our world, and bring us to the crisis, the crossroads, the point of decision----

for or against life,

for or against what is good and true, beautiful and right.

for or against our best selves,
for or against God's Kingdom and God's justice and God's peace.

It's like the sticker that read “If you are tired of sin, read John 3: 16.” Below was scribbled a handwritten note, “If you're not tired of sin, call Trixie at 555--1176.”

Jesus says that his person, his mission, has placed all humanity in a crisis: a time for discernment and judgement and decision.

He demands a definitive decision on the part of his followers. Our “Yes” has to be “Yes”. Our “No” has to be “No.” Discipleship precludes indecision and compromise.

The people of Jeremiah's time had surrendered to compromise and infidelity; Jeremiah called them on it, and they struck back.

And the same has been true in every age of the Church; so many have striven to become perfect models of inoffensive Christianity.

But Jesus warns against those who are neither hot nor cold; the tepid he spits from his mouth.

He has come to offend the world's mediocrity, its evil, its indifference.

With no middle path in which to find refuge, each of us has to choose:

either accept Jesus and suffer the consequences,
or reject Jesus, and suffer the consequences.

As Scott Peck said, in The Road Less Traveled, for most people, sin consists in the attempt to avoid legitimate suffering.

God didn't bring us here to avoid the choice. God didn't call us to discipleship in order to spare us from the storm.

Fountains of living water within us, hearts aflame with the Spirit, cannot be denied.

Until Jesus comes again to establish the reign of God definitively and universally, the Church will be asked to pay the cost of discipleship, in fire and in division.

We will struggle with the paradox that working for peace will sometimes be the occasion of conflict;

that words of love spoken in truth will sometimes lead to rejection and estrangement.

Authentic, faithful disciples will often find themselves at odds with, and even in conflict with, the world.

As it was with Jesus, so too it was with the first disciples, and so too shall it be for the Church which calls itself Christian, until the end of the ages, when Christ returns in glory.

To be ready for that great day,
pray for courage.

Pray for wisdom.

Pray for the grace to be faithful disciples.

Pray that in all the moments of testing, you and I and all of us will be willing to pay the cost of following Jesus the Lord.

And the people of God said, Amen.

