

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Reflections on **Zechariah 12: 10-11; Galatians 3: 26-28; Luke 9: 18-24**

Take up your cross and follow me . . . if you would save your life, you will lose it . . . That is where today's reading is heading.

Every year, somewhere in the middle of ordinary time, we read about this pivotal event, in whichever gospel – Matthew, Mark, or Luke – we are following that year. The pattern is always the same. The story begins with Jesus's question to his disciples, *Who do you say that I am?*

Peter pipes up with the right answer – though, as it turns out, he doesn't really get what it means. Then Jesus tells them, for the first time, that terrible suffering lies ahead for him, and by extension, for his followers.

This prediction must have come as quite a shock to them: They had been attracted to him by his generous and inclusive message, which he not only preached but lived; they had seen him work wonders, feeding and healing people; they had watched him outwit the scribes and Pharisees. Was there anything this guy couldn't do?

It was Peter who put their hopes into words—this was the messiah, who would save them! And now Jesus is saying that his mission entails terrible suffering? Losing one's life?! It is a big shift in meaning, running counter to all their expectations.

This year, Cycle C in our three-year lectionary, we are following the gospel of Luke. Now as Catholics, we are better acquainted with Matthew's version, in which Peter gets the right answer and Jesus pauses to praise him: *Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, adding You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the*

gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Next year, when go back to Matthew's version, the Sunday gospel reading will stop here, and we will have to wait a whole week for the rest of the story: how Jesus foretells his passion; Peter protests that that cannot be; and Jesus has to tell his star pupil, *Get behind me, you Satan!*

But in Luke's gospel the two halves are literally inseparable. In the original Greek, a single sentence starts with Jesus warning the disciples not to reveal what Peter has just said out loud, and finishes with his prediction of the passion: *Jesus ordered them strictly not to tell this to anyone, saying the Son of Man must suffer many things . . .* So, when Luke retells this story, he does not stop to talk about Peter, but moves right to the main lesson for us: *Take up your cross, EVERY DAY, and follow in my steps.*

There are some real advantages to keeping the story together. For one thing, it reminds us that getting the right answer, saying the right words – valuable as that is – just isn't enough. Peter still has a lot to learn, and a long way to go in his spiritual journey.

Peter reminds me of the eager young students at the midwestern university where my husband worked for many years. Every year, when the warm weather returned in the spring, they would emerge from their dorms and classrooms onto the Oval, the grassy center of campus. Most of them came out to sunbathe or play frisbee, but a certain number took this opportunity to approach their fellow students and other passersby, asking whether they had accepted Jesus Christ as their “personal Lord and Savior.”

It was critically important to have the right

answer. For some, the correct answer even meant that one would be raptured away from the terrible suffering that awaited the rest of humanity! Sometimes the student would be a “Jew for Jesus,” for whom Peter’s answer was exactly right: Jesus is “the Messiah of God.” I don’t think any of these ardent young people were ready to hear that one must lose one’s life in order to save it.

I don’t want to criticize them for their enthusiasm at having discovered Jesus, or for having a correct answer about who he is. They – and we, if truth be told, still have a long way to go in understanding how correct belief – orthodoxy – translates into Christ-like living – orthopraxy. This is Luke’s main concern.

So, when Luke contemplated this scene (he knew Mark’s version of the story), and retold it for his community, he made some changes, to bring out what he thought was important.

For one thing, he sets the story in a context of prayer, which gives it a different tone: *One day, when Jesus was praying in seclusion and the disciples were with him . . .* (Mark and Matthew have them talking on the road, as they were all walking toward Caesarea Philippi). What might this suggest? Perhaps Jesus himself was just coming into an awareness of what lay ahead of him (Luke, after all, is the evangelist who speaks of Jesus “increasing in wisdom and years” as he grew up). Or maybe Jesus felt that this was the right time and place to bring up a very difficult topic. In either case, there is a sense that a development in understanding must take place, and that prayer is where this happens.

It is also worth noting that, while Jesus accepted the title of “Messiah,” he immediately reverted to his own favorite way of speaking about himself: *The Son of Man must suffer grievously.*

Here I have to admit that that title is problematic for any community that tries to use inclusive language in their lectionary; in reading the gospel aloud to you a minute ago, I had to put it back in. But in actual fact, the word “man” (*anthropos* in the original Greek) clearly means humankind in general, not the male of the species. And since we all acknowledge that

Jesus was born a son and not a daughter, that word need not detain us here either.

The “Son of Man,” in its root sense, means simply a human being, someone born of human parentage, into a human family. When Jesus uses this title in this context he signals his embrace of the human condition into which he was born, with all its joys and its sorrows.

It is the sorrows and the sufferings that come to the fore today, not only in the gospel, but also in the first reading, from the book of the prophet Zechariah. This is a strange and difficult text, because we really don’t know when it was written or for whom it was intended.

But it clearly accepts grief and sorrow as a part of our God-given human condition:

I will pour out a spirit of pity and compassion on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem . . . ; they will mourn . . . and weep bitterly . . .

All kinds of mourning are mentioned. Mourning for a dead child needs no explanation, but the other references are more difficult. Hadad-Rimmon was a name for Baal, the Canaanite fertility god, who died as the vegetation withered every summer, and then came roaring back to life, as a god of thunder, with the autumn rains; perhaps yearly mourning for his death was proverbial.

As for Megiddo, this was the site of a great national tragedy, when the last good ruler of Judah, King Josiah, died at this mountain stronghold while trying to keep the Egyptians from linking up with the Babylonians. After his death it was only a matter of time before Babylon swept away the Israelite kingdom.

Whatever the reason for the mourning – personal loss or national tragedy, seasonal and natural disaster or violent death and destruction – this reading makes clear that God wants us to mourn with those who suffer.

We might consider a modern paraphrase, and ask God to *pour out a spirit of pity and compassion on the White House and the Houses of Congress, on all the inhabitants of Washington and our whole nation.*

We can and should mourn in solidarity with those who have lost home and family members

in recent wildfires and tornadoes, those who have suffered the violence of warfare in Syria or Afghanistan, the parents of Newtown, Connecticut, and the families of the many child victims of gun violence in the six months since then.

Jesus, the Son of Man, embraces all human suffering; indeed, he endured it to an extraordinary extent in his own flesh. The title “Son of Man” reminds us of our common humanity in another way as well. The Hebrew phrase is *ben adam*, which harkens back to the first creation story in Genesis, when *God created “adam”* (humankind) *in God's own image . . . male and female he created them*. (Obviously, this is *adam* before it became a masculine proper name). This ties in with today's second reading, from Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which Paul sees all of humanity in Christ, just as at the creation, before there was any hierarchy of male and female, prior to all the oppositions human cultures and institutions have created between Jew and Gentile, slave and free.

Finally, Luke presses home his understanding of Jesus's message with another change of word-

ing: *Take up your cross EVERY DAY, and follow in my steps*. Luke and his listeners knew the road Jesus had walked, and the roads traveled by his disciples after him. But Jesus's message was not just “history”; it was a current reality for Luke's community, as it is for us also.

We are all still living the challenges of discipleship: *You who wish to be my followers must deny your very self, take up your cross EVERY DAY, and follow in my steps. If you would save your life, you will lose it; and if you lose your life for my sake, you will save it*. Accepting our daily cross is an ongoing necessity, a spiritual practice, a habit we cultivate of looking beyond ourselves to the example of Jesus and the needs of those around us.

This brings us back full circle to the opening lines of today's gospel: *One day while Jesus was praying in seclusion, with his disciples . . .* It is our time spent with Jesus, and with each other, in prayer that gives us the inspiration, the comfort, and the strength to carry our daily cross and to share fully the joys and sorrows of our human, God-given condition.