

The Gospel today reminds us that being a Christian does not mean that life will necessarily be easy. There is a cost to discipleship. We live in a world that does not always share our values. More often than we like, we encounter people that are openly hostile to Christian values and teachings. We see this not just among people with secular values. We have to acknowledge that there is real presence of evil in this world, evil that goes beyond an Adolf Hitler or an Osama bin Laden. Traditionally, the Church maintains that in our world there is a polarity, of good and evil, darkness and lightness, heaven and hell. The Church refers to the kingdom of God, which is a state of being where God's love reigns supreme, and a kingdom of evil, in which the evil one or devil reigns. The kingdoms are in constant warfare with each other, struggling to prevail. When we look at the history of humanity, it certainly seems that this understanding is not far off.

Christians live in a world that unceasingly tempts us to do evil, to take a lesser road in life, to please and appease the self with no regard for the cost it will have on others. The Church, when it is true to itself and its Lord, calls us to seek the higher road and willingly pay the price the world extracts of the righteous, the loving and the merciful. The whole of our Lord's ministry focused on calling us to this higher road. In our Lord's "Sermon on the Mount," he spoke of those "who are blessed." We do not do a good job with the Greek of the Gospels. The meaning of "blessed," as the Greek has been translated, is best described as possessing an inward contentedness and joy that is not affected by the physical circumstances, in other words, a soul at peace. The Beatitudes imply that people not normally considered blessed on Earth are in fact blessed by God and will experience the Kingdom of God. There is a string of blessed ones: the poor, the persecuted, the meek, the merciful, the hungry, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. If there is one group that stands above them all, in terms of being even more blessed, it is those that are persecuted for seeking righteousness. The gospel texts all agree that it is those seeking righteousness that are assured of a place in the kingdom of God.

The price for seeking righteousness is the focus of today's Gospel passage in Matthew. Jesus warns again and again that those who follow him as disciples will pay a price. He said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." This is figurative speech, certainly, but his point is made. We have to be willing to take up the cross if we want to be disciples. We don't have to look far for examples. We don't have to look at the plight of Christians in Moslem countries. We can find martyrs right among us, some of whom have paid the cost of discipleship with their lives; more commonly we pay with scorn. So we are taught, from an early age, that if we want to get along we must play life smart, never discussing religion and politics. We are told that we must absolutely separate religion from public life. Well, if we abide by this, we can only describe ourselves as closet Christians, hiding for fear of humiliation and persecution. I think we have to honestly ask ourselves that if we act as if we are ashamed of God because of a fear of consequences from others, what do we suppose God thinks of us? Jesus was pretty clear on this, in today's Gospel reading. "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." It is something to think about. To share the glory of God's kingdom, we must be disciples. To be a disciple is to study and learn from the Lord and then proclaim the Lord wherever the Holy Spirit takes us. All of us baptized into his death and resurrection are called to proclaim, in thought, word and deed, the good news of the Risen Christ. If we do it, we should feel assured that on that day when Jesus stands before us as judge, we will hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." *Amen.*