

The reading from Saint Mark, today, continues the story from last week. In its context, it takes place immediately after Peter's "Confession" at Caesarea Philippi. In last week's gospel reading, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am," Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." Then Jesus began to teach that he would be crucified, something Peter didn't like and chose to argue about. That is where we pick up, in Mark's gospel today.

You should recall from last week's reading that shortly after the incident with Peter, Jesus told the disciples that he was going to die, and that if they wanted to be truly be his disciples, then they, too, must also take up the cross. This statement had only one meaning. The meaning is the same for us, today. Discipleship is the imitation of Christ, which means that discipleship is being like Christ. That means serving others as Christ served us, through unconditional, sacrificial love. It means asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" and doing it. It means loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and loving your neighbor just as you love yourself. In short, it means crucifying personal pride on the cross so that you can live in Christ by living for Christ. The Church has always taught that the root of all sin is human pride. This is the point of the mythical story of Adam and Eve, in Genesis. This is a consistent teaching throughout the Bible. This, especially, is the unwavering point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The mother of all sin is pride.

Jesus made this point as clearly as it could be made, in the hours following Peter's "confession." That makes what happened, almost immediately, so very strange. When they got to the village of Capernaum, to spend the night, once they got settled in the house where they were staying, Jesus asked his closest friends what they had been talking about, just a little outside of his hearing, as they walked along the way. Mark tells us that there was dead silence. The Lord's chosen disciples were embarrassed beyond words. You can imagine the shame, the red faces. The very pride that our Lord warned about and condemned had gotten to them and corrupted them. What they had been arguing about which one among them was the greatest, the most important, - the top dog in the disciple world. Pride blocked their ability to discern, and it kept them from hearing God's word in Jesus Christ. It put them in that realm of sin that keeps anyone who cannot overcome pride from being witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. This story tells us how very difficult it is to truly follow Jesus. Putting Christ first is not an easy task.

I think that, under the circumstances, Jesus was especially kind and gentle in his response to his disciples. Mark conveys a sense of understanding and compassion that is remarkable. But once again, Jesus began to teach them that if they would be Christ-like, if they would live *imago Christi* – that is as an icon of Christ, they must set pride aside. Jesus said, the way to being first, in other words the way to spiritual and moral

perfection, is by making yourself the servant of all. Do you see that this is exactly what Jesus did? This is exactly what the Cross is all about. Jesus didn't die in order to be glorified on Easter. Jesus died to redeem us from sin. Jesus died to make us holy, so that we might dare to live before our God. Easter is God's great gift, God's great promise to us if we are willing to follow Jesus, wherever he leads, what ever the cost. Easter is God's gift to those willing to set aside unhealthy pride that keeps us from doing the will of God. You cannot get to Easter and its promise of eternal life in the presence of God without going through your own personal Good Friday in which you say, "Wherever he leads, I'll go."

The Way of the Cross is not easy. It is uphill all the way and it is a lifetime's journey. But it is a journey that we are asked to take, in the name of Christ, our Lord. *Amen.*