

True Life

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost) is Matthew 16:21-28. This text has two narratives: Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection and Jesus urging his disciples to take up their cross and follow him.

Jesus now set His eyes on Jerusalem, where He must suffer, die, and on the third day be raised in order to fulfill His Father's will (first Passion prediction recorded in Mt). The pace and direction of the conversation now becomes more focused and rapid. Instead of teaching the crowds in parables, he concentrated on preparing the disciples for his coming suffering and death. It will take some time for the disciples to realize what Jesus is saying. They will not, in fact, be able to grasp it until after the plan is carried out. That plan included providing eternal life for all who believe. That would be "true life."

When Jesus says that he will be killed, it grabbed the attention of the disciples, who caught their collective breath, looking at each other in disbelief. Peter, who in last week's gospel had made a great confession concerning Jesus, now, becomes unglued. Peter's harsh rebuke of Jesus resulted from his failure to envision a Christ who must suffer and die. Such a Messiah was not part of Jewish thinking at that time.

Peter was now being used by Satan to encourage Jesus to turn his face from Jerusalem and from doing "the things of God" that must be done.

Jesus now turns to the disciples, the people gathered around him asks them what they want to do now that they know who he is and what he has to do. If that is the case, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.

Jesus chose the way of service and obedience and suffering for the sake of Israel and the world. Now He calls every disciple – every Christian – to look at the darkness within, at the desire for power over others, and to deny that desire whenever and wherever it shows itself.

Jesus' call has, within itself, the power to create and sustain the faithful response it desires. His Word enables His disciples to follow Him wherever He goes. The Christ is going to the cross, on behalf of and in the place of all. The Son of the living God will be raised to resurrection life, the first-fruits and guarantee of the final day of victory for all in Him.

Next Jesus speaks of gaining and losing life. Jesus' disciples cannot calculate and plan ahead to preserve themselves. On the other hand and paradoxically, when one loses one's life – that is, trustingly relinquishes control and power and simply follow Jesus – then one finds life, indeed and forever. The two ways are like oil and water, light and darkness, life and death.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for being willing to suffer and die that I might be forgiven. Blessed Savior, give me the will and strength to take up the cross and follow you to life eternal. Amen. (TLSB)