



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In last week's Gospel, we heard about who different people say Jesus is. The first group is the wider world, as Jesus asks, "**Who do people say that the Son of Man is?**" (Matthew 16:14). The answer is various: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets (see v. 14).

The world tries to tell us who Jesus is, but always misses the mark. Today, the world is telling us that Jesus was a good teacher, or a guru, or a fiction, but never would the world tell us that He is God. We need to look past the world's take on Jesus to find the reality of who He is.

Jesus then asks the disciples who they say He is. As a whole, the disciples remain silent. Then, Simon Peter speaks without the consent of the others, "**You are the Messiah [Christ], the Son of the living God**" (v. 16). Jesus tells Peter that this truth was revealed to him by His heavenly Father (see v. 17).

We hear who the world says Jesus is, and we hear who the Father says Jesus is. But who does Jesus say He is? We find this in today's Gospel:

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21)

Jesus tells Peter – and us – that He is the Suffering Servant. We read about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-7, and 52:13-53:12), which are read throughout Holy Week. It is the story of the servant of the Lord who suffers and dies for the people. Jesus is saying that He is *that Servant*. He is going to suffer greatly and be killed. He does give the hope of the Resurrection, even in this revelation of His impending suffering and death.

Peter can't handle the Cross. He's much like us today, not wanting to face the Cross. Yet, Jesus says that to follow Him, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross (see v. 24). At the core of the Gospel is the truth that the world will not always go our way. We *will* suffer. That is a part of life. To follow Christ is not to escape suffering, but to find meaning in it, not to fear it, but to embrace it as a way to get close to Christ, the suffering servant. (Please note, it doesn't mean that we become masochistic and begin to love suffering. Rather, we love the One on the Cross, and so love suffering only as a *means* to the *end* of uniting to Christ). In Jesus' suffering and death, He redeems that suffering and death so now it has value, now it has purpose. We may not see the fruit of this suffering in this life, but suffering united to Christ *always bears fruit*. When looking at the martyrdom of the saints, very often we see an incredible growth in faith because of that martyrdom, but often not for decades or even centuries after the martyrdom. Suffering with Christ *always* bears fruit, though not always in our time.

It's too much to go into here, but I encourage you to read Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*, which discusses how he found meaning and purpose in suffering in a concentration camp in World War II. I also invite you to read St. John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (in Latin *Salvifici Doloris*, 1984).

Jesus says that His identity is to be the One who suffers to save the people – you and me. His Cross was not merely a miscarriage of justice, but the plan of the Father to save us from our sin, and to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. It was by His suffering and Cross that Jesus reveals the love of the Father, and lets loose a torrent of that merciful love upon the world. By uniting our little sufferings with His GREAT suffering, by uniting our little deaths with His death, we find meaning in suffering, unity with Jesus' merciful Heart, and we become a conduit of the grace of His Passion and death into the world.

Let us ask Jesus for that grace and strength not to flee in fear from suffering, but to embrace it as a means to get closer to our God who loves us enough to endure ultimate suffering.