

## 2nd Sunday in Lent



*Are you willing to carry your cross?*

### **Intro |**

How many of you like spicy food? You know like Indian Vindaloo, or Mexican Enchiladas with heaps of hot chilli peppers?

Did you know, in Chilean and Peruvian cuisine, there is a pepper called "aji" (pronounced "ah-hee") which is named because that's the sound you make screaming when you eat it!

Why this talk of spicy, hot food?

Well, some words Jesus' spoke are digested into our minds and hearts like comforting food such as chicken soup, or warm bread-and-butter pudding.

However, Jesus is also known to speak words that were not so comforting – in fact they are just as disturbing as spicy hot Vindaloo – making us break out in cold sweats or send chills down our spines!

And it is spicy, unsettling teaching that Jesus is sharing in today's passage.

Let's step into what is happening in the Gospel passage.

Jesus and his followers had just journeyed through Bethsaida. While they were there, Jesus had healed the blind man, restoring his sight completely.

Because Jesus was generating quite a following, he told the blind man not to tell anyone about his healing and promptly left town to go to Caesarea Philippi.

Keep in mind, Caesarea Philippi, was one of the spiciest places to visit. It was in this town that the 'gates to the underworld or hell' were located, where the most vile and evil practices were performed.

While in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus began to question the disciples about whether they really understood who he was (see Mark 8:27-30).

While the disciples made various suggestions, Peter piped up saying: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." [*Note to reader: You can read the same account in Matthew 16:13-28.*]

While Peter's faith-filled confession lingered in the air, Jesus began to teach them about the kind of Messiah God had purposed him to be.

Remember, when Peter named Jesus 'the Messiah', a myriad of images stirred in their heads – pictures of a mighty warrior who would bring freedom and victory over their horrendous oppressors.

So, when Peter declared "You are the Messiah", they probably all sighed inwardly "Great! Finally, the one who will set us free and fix all our troubles has come."

Straight away Jesus began to tell them that God's plan for him was to suffer many terrible things and be rejected, and ultimately die at the hands of the Jewish leaders and their Roman oppressors. *[Note to reader: The notion of Jesus suffering was obviously so strange to the ears of the disciples, Jesus had to say it three times (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34)].*

Is it any wonder Peter pulled Jesus aside and told him off.

"How dare you speak like that about yourself, Jesus", I imagine Peter saying.

"How can *you* the Son of God, God's chosen triumphant King, allow yourself to suffer and die by the hands of such evil powers. God has called you to triumph over them!"

Immediately, Jesus responded – firmly, sharply and authoritatively - without a hint of comforting 'bread-and-butter pudding' like response,

*"Get away from me Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."* (Mark 8:33 or Matthew 16:23)

Why did Jesus respond so passionately and aggressively?

Because within seconds, Peter had gone from declaring the Lordship of Jesus, to unwittingly becoming a spokesperson for satan.

We know that words have spiritual substance. And Peter had allowed his mouth to be used to release satan's plans and perspectives into the world. So now satan's plans were lingering in the air, not God's plans.

No wonder Jesus shut down these words straight away.

From this scenario we can see how easily it is for us to move from worshipping God, to letting our mouth become a trumpet in the hands of God's enemy.

When we lose sight of God's plan for us, and our focus moves to our own comfort, our possessions, our security, and the things of the world rather than upon sacrifice, service and proclaiming God's message – we may need to be rebuked to get back on track.

Do we allow others to challenge and correct us when we lose our focus?

However, Jesus took a step even further, serving up more spicy teaching.

He said,

*"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross and follow me."* (Mark 8:34)

Now this phrase 'take up your cross' has stirred much discussion.

Some believe Jesus is saying their cross is some burden they must carry in their lives: a strained relationship, a thankless job, a physical illness. This leads to people saying with prideful self-pitying, "That's my cross I have to carry."

That's not what Jesus meant.

When Jesus carried His cross up Golgotha to be crucified, no one was thinking of the cross as symbolic of a burden to carry. To a person in the first century, the cross meant only one thing: death by the most painful and humiliating means possible.

It is only two thousand years later that the cross became a cherished symbol of atonement, forgiveness, grace, and love.

Because the Romans forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion, bearing a cross meant carrying their own execution device while facing ridicule along the way to death.

So, *"Take up your cross and follow Me"* means being willing to die in order to follow Jesus. It's a call to absolute surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord.

In fact, Jesus explained what he meant,

*"if you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it."* (Mark 8:35).

What I find quite remarkable about Jesus is that when certain people expressed a desire to follow him, he appears to actually dissuade them. You can read about it in Luke 9 (57-62). By questioning them and revealing the cost and commitment involved, he revealed they were half-hearted in their intention to follow him. They weren't willing to take up their cross and crucify upon it their own comforts, desires and interests.

I wonder how many people would respond to the call, "Come follow Jesus, and you may face the loss of friends, family, reputation, career, and possibly even your life"?

The number of converts would likely decrease!

But that is the call that Jesus meant when He said, *"Take up your cross and follow Me."*

As we consider the cost of following Jesus, ask yourself:

- Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing some of your closest friends?
- Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means alienation from your family?
- Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means the loss of your reputation?
- Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means being consistently ridiculed and shamed?
- Are you willing to follow Jesus if it means losing your life?

In some places of the world, these consequences are reality.

However, for us who live in relative freedom from arrest and imprisonment, the question remains: "Because of your love for Jesus, are you willing?"

If there comes a point in your life where you are faced with a choice—Jesus or the world—which will you choose?

Commitment to Christ means giving up your hopes, dreams, possessions, your time, even your very life, if need be, for the cause of Christ. Only those who are willing to take up their cross – bearing the shame and embarrassment that goes with being a follower of Jesus Christ – is Jesus willing to call his disciple (Luke 14:27).

*"And those",* Jesus said, *"who do lose their life for me, will find it"* (Matthew 16:25-26).

And they don't just find their old life. Rather, they find a new, fuller, more joyous life, which they'll enjoy eternally with Jesus as their Lord, and God Almighty as their beloved Heavenly Father."

So, let us take up our cross and follow Christ, fully surrendering to him in every aspect of our life.