

Sunday Homily

24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

12 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

"He began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously."

Illustration

Joe greeted his mother as she arrived home. "Mum, I've got two bits of good news, and only one bit of bad news," he said. "The first bit of good news is that I checked the lottery results, and your numbers have won the jackpot! And the other bit of good news is that I gave that bag of old clothes to the charity collection, like you said." "That's great," said Joe's mother. "But what's the bad news?" "Well," said Joe, "the bad news is that I think your lottery ticket was in the pocket of that old pair of trousers you wanted to get rid of."

Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel there's a good news/bad news story, but it's certainly no joke. Throughout the first half of Mark's Gospel everyone seems to be trying to discover who Jesus is. They've heard his powerful words, witnessed his mighty deeds, and they keep asking: "Who then is this?" The religious leaders say he's in the power of Beelzebul, prince of devils. Many of the people suspect he might be a prophet. As for the disciples, they're bewildered, now reacting with wonder and complete confidence in him, now questioning and unsure.

So the scene is set for the episode in Caesarea Philippi, way up in the north of the country. Jesus, alone with his closest friends, asks them who people think he is. They tell him the current views and then he asks: "Who do you say I am?" This is the beginning of the good news/bad news story. The good news is summed up in Peter's dramatic reply: "You are the Christ." At long last they've discovered the truth about Jesus: he is the long-awaited Messiah.

But immediately Jesus responds: "Say nothing of this to anyone." Peter may have got the good news about Jesus but he's not ready for the bad news; and it must have sounded like very bad news indeed. The disciples had discovered Jesus' identity; now they are to discover his destiny, for "he began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death".

They'd always thought of the Messiah as a powerful, victorious figure. But a Messiah destined to suffer, to be rejected, to be put to death? A defeated Messiah, a humiliated Messiah, a dead Messiah? Peter's immediate reaction is to take

Jesus aside and argue with him. Jesus' response is to rebuke Peter in words that must have shaken him to the core: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter is playing the devil's game, trying to dissuade Jesus from the path he must tread – a path that, humanly speaking, he would much rather avoid. Yet he goes forward boldly towards Jerusalem and certain death.

Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military leaders of all time, once made an eleven-day forced march with his troops. They were exhausted and almost dying of thirst. Some of the soldiers managed to collect water from a stream in a helmet and took it to their leader. After a moment's hesitation, Alexander handed the helmet back, its contents untouched. He wouldn't ask his men to do anything he wouldn't do himself. His action had an electrifying effect: with a leader like this, the soldiers could overcome weariness and thirst. Indeed, says the writer who recorded this incident, they looked upon themselves "as little less than immortal".

Application

Today Jesus is putting the question to us: Who do you say I am? Do you accept me as your leader? I tell you the truth: being my true followers means you must deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me, though I assure you I will never ask you to do anything that I am not prepared to do. I know that following me can sometimes seem like a kind of dying. But through my death and resurrection, which you are celebrating at this Mass, I assure you that victory is yours.

Alexander's soldiers may have thought they were immortal; but if we are faithful followers of Jesus Christ we are immortal. Though we must die in this world, we are destined for a heavenly life of a richness and fullness we've never known before, life never marred by tears or sorrows, but a life of perfect joy and one that lasts for ever. This is no good news/bad news story. This is sheer good news – the best news the world has ever heard.