

Usually when we ask someone, "How are you?" the last thing we want is an honest answer. We really don't want to hear about the aches and pains, the frustrations of family life, the doubts of faith, the hateful job, and the sick cat; we just want people to say, "Fine." Well, conversations might never get anywhere if we took the opening hellos too seriously. Changing the answer to "How are you?" would be like changing the answer to "The Lord be with you." Imagine starting Mass this way: I say, "The Lord be with you;" you say something honest like, "I hope so, because I don't feel like he really is yet today." Sadly, society doesn't let us share too much about relationships. We don't expect and we don't give an honest response to "How are you?" because it would bog us down. "Fine" is efficient.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples how he is, and how he's going to be. He tells the truth, which they're not ready to hear. He tells them he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised--a future that is not 'fine', especially to Peter. "God forbid it, Lord!" he says. "This must never happen to you." We could understand Peter resisting his own suffering, but he couldn't stand to hear the suffering Jesus would endure. We get the same way: Suffering is so repulsive, that it hurts not just when we undergo it ourselves but when we hear someone else describe theirs. Some people don't want to hear an honest answer to "How are you?" or to learn about places like Northern Ireland, Uganda, South Africa, El Salvador and the mideast. Movies which don't provide a happy ending fail at the box office. Even at death we create the illusion that our loved ones have just fallen asleep. They wear makeup, they dress up, they lie on cushions, they go to a cemetery where green carpet covers up the hole and the hill; mourners leave before lowering the casket, keeping the illusion that everything is fine. We don't even want to hear about suffering. God forbid it, Lord. Suffering should never happen to you, or you, or you, or them, or me.

Jesus, however, bluntly told the truth. If you want to be a follower take up a cross. Sign yourself with a cross. Pray before a cross. Receive blessings with a cross. Jesus sticks the cross in our face. Suffering paves the path of life. If we want to be free from suffering, we don't avoid it; we go through it. And in it we find life.