

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Surely Peter meant well. He loved Jesus. As we heard in last Sunday's gospel, Jesus had just declared Peter blessed, an interpreter of divine revelation, a rock. Peter probably felt protective of his friend and mentor. When Jesus predicted his own passion, Peter said, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." We would react the same way if someone we loved feared for the future. We would forestall any danger.

Peter was probably also hoping that he and the other disciples would avoid a similar fate. He surely preferred not to lose his life, but to save it.

Jesus had pointed words for Peter. The man he had just called a rock he now called a different kind of stone: a stumbling block, "an obstacle." Jesus then said words Peter surely hoped he'd never hear: "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it." Jesus had predicted his passion without mentioning his crucifixion, but he revealed what was coming with a graphic aphorism: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Then with some consolation he promised, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Following Christ brings many benefits. It provides a key to moral behavior and good decision-making, it offers hope where there is despair, it activates the spiritual side of humanity, making us fuller persons. It feels good to follow Christ.

Following Christ also brings challenges. It prompts disagreements, it causes inconveniences, it may even threaten one's life. It feels dangerous to follow Christ.

We sometimes choose the easy way out. We do what others do, to avoid their disapproval. We seek personal pleasures that quickly dissipate and produce remorse. We seek the happiness of the resurrection without the burden of the cross.

In the second century, an unknown writer elaborated the life of St. Peter, probably drawing on traditions more than history. Peter had traveled to Rome to spread the gospel, but found his life was in danger. Nero was out to get him as the chief priests sought to kill Jesus. Peter fled the city to avoid arrest, running along the Appian Way, a street mentioned in the New Testament and still walkable today. There Peter had a vision. On the same road leading him out of the city of Rome, he encountered the risen Jesus heading toward it. Peter asked, "*Quo vadis?*" Or "Where are you going?" Jesus said, "To Rome to be crucified again." Today a church stands on the site of this legendary encounter, where one can see footprints attributed to Peter as he realized his mistake, turned around, and walked back to the city for his own crucifixion. Peter took up his cross. He lost his life, and he found the reason for which he was made.

Hearing Jesus predict his passion, Peter spoke words of love. Sometimes our best intended words of love are the wrong words. People often don't need protection as much as they need accompaniment. The road to glory passes through suffering. And when we start walking our own Appian Way, away from the burden of responsibility, we may hear the words of Jesus pointing us back in the right direction. "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."