

A student goes off to college, knowing that it is costing her parents a lot of money, so she is determined to work hard and make them proud. Away from home she encounters other students treat the college experience as an endless party and take the easiest possible courses so that studying won't interfere with the good times. They mock the girl that studies and takes her classes seriously and it hurts because she would like to join them. The college student isn't antisocial but she knows that her future career and her parents' hard earned money depend on what she does right now. She has chosen a path that is important to her and she can put up with the scorn of her classmates. That young woman understands the cross of Christ.

A young couple fall in love and marry and look forward to many happy years together. But some of those years may be marred by serious illness, temptations to be unfaithful, or eventually having Alzheimer's slowly take your spouse away from you. Right now young couple isn't really thinking about all the problems that will come their way but they do take their vows seriously and for the sake of their life together they will endure whatever forces try to tear them apart. They will come to understand the cross of Christ.

A young guy hopes to learn some skills that will get him a good job; he wants to get away from home for a while; he wants to serve his country. So he joins the military: he gets great training in electronics, he travels to exotic places. The soldier will the best he can to avoid serious injury but he knows that if you are too afraid to risk anything and you avoid everything that threatens you,

then you never really get a chance to live, maybe you don't even have anything to live for. That soldier will come home missing a leg from a roadside explosive. He understands the cross of Christ.

In the gospel we find Jesus saying, **“Whoever wishes to come after me must take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”**

And Simon Peter responds, "You are the Christ." Jesus accepts that answer. It's not complete, but it is accurate enough. Jesus accepts Peter's response because it points to his mission, the reason he came. He is the Christ, that is, the anointed one, or in Hebrew, "Messiah." He has been anointed by the Holy Spirit for a purpose.

But Jesus' purpose isn't quite what Peter and the other apostles were expecting. They thought of the Messiah as a triumphal figure, a great general who would lead them to victory in their struggle against Roman dominance. But Jesus does not see his role that way. Yes, he is the Christ, but his mission is to reveal who his father really is, the sort of relationship he wants with his people and the astounding possibilities that come with sharing God very life. There is nothing more important, there is nothing that can sway Jesus from spreading that word -- even though it was obvious to Jesus that eventually it would lead him **"to suffer greatly...be rejected...and killed..."** That suffering was not his purpose in life but those were the inevitable obstacles that he refused to let stop him.

Sometimes our tradition or at least some of our fellow Christians have been very wrong about this. It is important that we be clear **that suffering is not a goal**, or a necessity. **It's not what God wants for us**; it's not something we should seek out to please him. But suffering is something we are likely to encounter **and** it is something we can deal with because like Christ we know what really matters.

Victor Frankel is a famous psychologist who observed the behavior of his fellow concentration camp inmates during WWII. Their lives were a horror of suffering and mistreatment; many just gave up and died and yet some seemed almost impervious to whatever the Nazi threw at them. Frankel found that inmates who were focus on something that really mattered to them were able to endure almost anything. Without that focus, they just didn't last very long.

For Christians the cross has always been a focus but the cross is sacred because it reminds us that suffering isn't the most significant thing we encounter in life. The cross says suffering – no matter how painful - is temporary, but God offers us something eternal. Suffering can steal away bits and pieces of our life but God offers us his own life and nothing takes that away from us. The cross tells us that nothing this life offers us and nothing this life can take from us are even close to the impact of God's offer to share his own life with us.

The talk about suffering and the cross made Jesus apostles uncomfortable because they hadn't yet seen the next chapter in the story.

For them the thought that the person they placed their hopes in, the one that seemed so powerful, the thought that he might face death was like admitting defeat.

**We** know that the cross is just a threshold Jesus had to move beyond to make clear what sharing God's life really meant. In this gospel story today they simply didn't understand the cross. But the really important issue today is whether we understand it. Have we learned to see beyond it? Have we found that focus on what really matters that makes any suffering just a step toward glory?

We are once again in a time when it takes courage to be a Catholic, a true Catholic, one who is not going to compromise on gospel because it makes us different from the society around us. The Lord never said that we would be in the majority or that following Him would be popular. But He did promise us this: if we follow Him, He would be with us, supporting us, caring for us, and winning the final battle over evil for us. That is the promise of the cross. We pray this week for the courage to be Catholic and for the wisdom to keep our focus on the things that really matter – now and always.