

## 22<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (September 3, 2023)

As the years continue to roll on, I have come to love and appreciate St. Peter more and more. Yes, he was the rock on which Jesus determined to build his church as we heard last week. But that didn't make him any less human or imperfect. At times Peter soared to the heights; for example he was one of only three others who saw Jesus transfigured into his divine glory. And when Jesus asked the apostles “who do you say that I am?”, Peter boldly and correctly replied: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

But then there were other times when Peter really blew it and stumbled badly. This passage from Matthew's gospel we hear today follows immediately after what we heard last week when Jesus praised Peter's response to his question. But now, Jesus begins to tell them how he will suffer and die and then rise on the third day. Here is where Peter messes up big time—he rejects Jesus' words and says in essence: “no way, Lord—that can't ever happen!” And Jesus' response? “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.” That sure is a far cry from last week's “blessed are you, Simon...I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven”, isn't it??

It's clear from the gospels: Peter sometimes understood Jesus, and sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he grasped the demands of discipleship, and sometimes he didn't. Sound familiar? It should...because Peter, although chosen by Christ to be an apostle and to be that Rock for the Church, was still part of the human race as we all are. Peter shared our weakness, our confusion and lack of understanding, and yes, even our sinfulness.

But back to this gospel: I think we can readily sympathize with Peter's confusion. By this time, Peter was not only a follower of Jesus, but had also come to love him as friend. And so when Jesus began talking about how he would suffer greatly and actually be killed, Peter was stunned and scandalized. Suffering was then seen as the ultimate evil from which no good could ever come forth; that same attitude is often present today as well. Peter did not yet get the necessary connection between Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, and the salvation of the human race. That is in part why Jesus told him “you are not thinking as God does, but as human beings do.”

On one level, we can't help but think ‘as human beings do’—we are human beings and not God, and so we do not and in fact cannot have the whole picture. Peter ultimately did get it: he went through the horror of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion...and the great guilt of denying three times that he even knew Jesus. But then he saw the risen Christ along with the other apostles, with them he then received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and fully embraced and preached the risen Christ even to the point of his own death by martyrdom.

In the meantime, we still wonder, we remain confused and maybe fearful, we struggle with the crosses and sadness and tragedies of this life...and we cry out “Why?? What's the point of all this? God, don't you even care that I'm going through all this? This makes no sense whatsoever!” Welcome to the human condition wherein we might change Peter's words and declare: “God forbid, Lord! No such thing should ever happen to me or to my loved one!” Welcome to the human condition wherein we cannot yet see the whole picture and therefore do not understand why God could allow such pain or evil that at times seems overwhelming.

Many years ago I came across a really good reflection on this subject, one of the best I've ever seen. It's entitled “The Embroidery”:

'When I was a little boy, my mother used to embroider a great deal. As from the underside I watched her work within the boundaries of the little round hoop that she held in her hand, I complained to her that it sure looked messy from where I sat. She would smile at me, look down and gently say, 'My son, you go about your playing for a while, and when I am finished, I will put you on my knee and let you see it from my side.' I would wonder why she was using some dark threads along with the bright ones and why they seemed so jumbled from my view.

'A few minutes would pass and then I would hear Mother's voice say, 'Son, come and sit on my knee.' This I did, only to be surprised and thrilled to see a beautiful flower or a sunset. I could not believe it because from underneath it looked so messy. Then Mother would say, 'from underneath it did look messy and jumbled, but you did not realize there was a plan and design on the top—I was only following it. Now look at it from my side and you will see what I was doing.'

'Many times since then I have looked up to God in heaven and said 'Father, what are you doing?' He would answer 'I am embroidering your life.' I say, 'But it looks like nothing more than a jumbled mess to me.' And I heard the Father say "My child, you go about your business of doing my business, and one day I will bring you to heaven and put you on my knee...and you will see the plan from my side.'

We do not see the whole picture in this life because we cannot see the whole picture in this life. **But God does...**and by the power of his merciful love, he can and does bring great beauty and meaning and purpose out of what seem to be the worst and most hopeless circumstances. The fact that we don't yet understand how that is even possible is, of course, no limit whatsoever on God's power to do it. And the fact that he raised his Son Jesus from the dead, and thereby destroyed once and for all the lasting power of sin and death, is the strongest and most irrefutable proof of the divine power to bring the greatest possible good--our salvation--out of the greatest possible evil—the death of his Son.

We cannot yet see the other side of God's design of our own lives; we so often 'are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do'. So let's ask St. Peter and the other apostles and saints to pray for us and for our suffering loved ones that we will be able to go forward with deepened faith and strengthened hope in this life until the day when we will have the vision to see with great joy and gratitude how God knew exactly what he was doing when crafting the embroidery of life for each one of us.