

Messiah but not Mighty Mouse: a lesson in discipleship.

Let us pray. *Blessed Father, who knows our strengths and weaknesses, abide with us through the Holy Spirit that we might in love increasingly become obedient to your will though Jesus Christ, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.*

An extraordinarily handsome man decided he had the responsibility to marry the perfect woman so they could produce beautiful children beyond compare. With that as his mission he began searching for the perfect woman when he met a farmer who had three stunning, gorgeous daughters. He explained his mission to the farmer, asking for permission to marry one of them. The farmer replied, "They're lookin' to get married, so you came to the right place. Look 'em over and pick the one you want."

The man dated the first daughter. The next day the farmer asked for the man's opinion. "Well," said the man, "she's just a weeeee bit, not that you can hardly notice, pigeon-toed." The farmer nodded and suggested the man date one of the other girls; so the man went out with the second daughter. The next day, the farmer again asked how things went. "Well," the man replied, "she's just a weeeee bit, not that you can hardly tell, cross-eyed." The farmer nodded and suggested he date the third girl. So he did. The next morning the man rushed in exclaiming, "She's perfect, just perfect. She's the one I want to marry." So they were wed right away. Months later the baby was born. When the man visited the nursery he was horrified: the baby was the ugliest, most pathetic human you can imagine. He rushed to his father-in-law to ask how such a thing could happen considering the beauty of the parents. "Well," explained the farmer, "She was just a weeeee bit, not that you could hardly tell, pregnant when you met her."

We might select any number of words to describe how the handsome man felt concerning this disturbing revelation about his perfect, beautiful wife: deceived, duped, cheated, misled, lied to and on and on. But, I would like to suggest that there is one word under which all of these others might be subsumed and that word is "disillusioned." The handsome man was disillusioned that his beautiful wife wasn't as perfect as he thought she was. The dictionary defines the word disillusioned as meaning to be freed from or deprived of illusion, belief or idealism. Its synonym would include to undeceive and in the process be disappointed.

In our gospel reading we find Jesus' disciples similarly disillusioned. Jesus is not the man, the messiah that they thought he was. Peter, the chief apostle, takes the lead in expressing this disillusionment. He is responding to what Jesus has told them in v. 21: "*that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering . . . and be killed.*" Almost as if he is taking an unruly child aside to reprimand him, Peter in v. 22 responds to this disturbing revelation by rebuking Jesus, saying, "*God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you.*" As we shall see Peter is misguided, in fact presumptuous in his rebuke of the Lord. Yet, Peter's failure provides the opportunity for us to learn what true discipleship for Christians means.

Now, the fact that Peter has seriously misunderstood Jesus and his mission surely must have come as a surprise to Peter and the other disciples. Just a few verses (v. 15) earlier in this same chapter when Jesus asked the disciples: "*But who do you say that I am?*", Peter responded: "You are the

eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma in which we find the ultimate meaning of our interpersonal relationship.” And Jesus said, “What?” No, that’s not exactly what Peter said. Is it? That trumped-up paraphrase was found on the walls of a theological college where someone was poking fun at the highfalutin language of German theologians.

No, what Peter said in response to Jesus’ question was, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (v. 16). To which Jesus replied, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church*”(v. 17-18). Given Peter’s correct identification of who Jesus is, Peter assumed, as v. 22 reveals, that he now knew what was best for Jesus and his ministry, wherein Peter said to Jesus, “*God forbid it, Lord!*” When you think about it; Peter has not really grasped the meaning of what he said when he correctly identified Jesus. If he had, do you think Peter would have presumed to tell the Son of God what’s best for Him? What could be more ridiculous?

But, we empathize with Peter; don’t we? We know where he was coming from. Peter expected the Messiah to be like a Super Man, a Bat Man or a Spider Man. He was looking for someone to save the day. Remember Mighty Mouse and the words that were always sung as he was about to appear to save someone from impending danger. “Here he comes to save the day. It means that Mighty Mouse is on the way. Here he comes to the save day.” We understand Peter’s need for a hero. If you have watched any of the super-hero movies, you know the thrill and excitement you experience when suddenly Super Man burst into the scene, Spider Man swings into the situation, or Bat Man glides down to the street to save the people from the bad guys. Its great. The bad guys are going to get their due. Victory is at hand and justice will be served, finally. And, we all clap and say hooray.

And, somewhere in our souls we find ourselves singing along with Bette Midler

“Did you ever know that you're my hero?
You're everything I wish I could be.
could fly higher than an eagle,
you are the wind beneath my wings.”

Like all of us, Peter brings his own expectations to the situation before him. His expectation was that the Christ would be triumphant, defeating the nasty Romans. How like us and our expectations that things will turn out a certain way. We elect a certain individual to a political office expecting him or her to behave a certain way. We marry a certain individual expecting him or her to treat us in a certain way. And then, then reality hits and the so-called honeymoon is over and we are disillusioned. What was once perfect and beautiful has in our minds given birth to something ugly and pathetic.

Here the disciples were hoping to be rid of Roman oppression when Jesus in effect told them in the words of the song by Tina Turner in the Mel Gibson movie.

“We don’t need another hero
We don’t need to know the way home
All we want is life beyond the Thunderdome”

As I have asked before, what good is a saviour who does not save. If Jesus was not going to save his followers from Roman oppression, persecution and death, then what good was He as a savior? That’s no hero. Such is the kind of question we might very well have asked ourselves from time to time. “If Jesus is my saviour, then why am I up to my eye balls in alligators? I thought my life as a Christian was supposed to be blessed, not cursed?” Then, as now, the followers of Jesus have been very slow to accept the necessity of sacrifice and suffering. If the Messiah has to suffer, think then what is to be the lot of his followers.

Peter stumbled, and, though he had been an instrument of revelation, he became a mouthpiece for Satan as Jesus calls him in v. 23. I hate to say, but, I suspect all of us at one time or another have been Satan's mouthpiece. On the face of it, when Peter told Jesus, "*This must never happen,*" this is something any of us might have said or will say. It really is not so difficult to imagine. Who of us has not second guessed someone else's decision? I suspect most of us would quickly second guess anyone if that person said what he or she was doing was because God had told him or her to do it. We would not trust such an assertion.

Taking an illustration from today's news, it is perhaps easier for us to believe that it is right to die for one's country fighting terrorism, than to say it is not God's will that a certain war be fought. We might then ask whether Cindy Sheehan, the mother in Texas whose son was killed in Iraq, has been, knowingly or unknowingly, obedient to God's will in challenging our continued presence in Iraq.

What caught Peter off guard and caused him to be on the side of Satan was his preconception and long-held belief that the Messiah would not die. It would appear, therefore, that long-held beliefs can be footholds for Satan to use to manipulate us. Following the will of God takes discernment and faith - two insubstantials, not easily measured or identified. Following the will of God does not equate to easy sailing as the cross of Jesus' so glaring reveals.

Recently, my brother I have been discussing the merits of the split of my home parish in Montgomery. He questions whether it was God's will that many departed when they did because not enough time and effort had been allotted to working things out and because the split has caused much grief and suffering. Is my brother right? Maybe yes, maybe no. Does that mean that God's will was not accomplished in the split? Maybe yes, maybe no.

So, Peter, the rock upon which Christ's church was to be built, has now become a stumbling block. With Peter as an example, the theologian, Michael Green, observes that: "Whatever spiritual experiences we have had, we remain just as fallible and weak as ever before. There is no plateau of spirituality to which we can ascend and be for ever thereafter raised above the weaknesses that assail others. Sin and failure are to be found in all the saints. In this lifelong spiritual battle, victory is achieved only through ceaseless vigilance." And, so, we will recall that the OT is full of examples of bad boys of the Bible. We have only to think of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, her husband, to know this is true.

Yet, Jesus knows our frailties and the means by which we are to deal with them. He said it clearly in v. 24: "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" This is what true discipleship means: taking up one's cross and following Jesus. One's cross is that which we are called to sacrifice in the name of being obedient to God's will. For Jesus, it was literally his life, his body. For us it can be any number of things: family, friends, money, health, long-held beliefs and expectations, our comfort, our pride and less likely, our bodies.

Following Jesus means surrender or denial of self— which, in the context of the gospel as a whole, means above all obedience to another's will — God's will. But, let me ask you, "Who here likes being told what to do." Obedience means doing what someone else has told you to do. Does it not? So, who here likes being told how to live his or her life? Raise your hand. For us independent, self-reliant, pioneering, opinionated Americans, that's especially difficult, isn't it? Isn't it in part the truth that civil rights, whether having to do with race, religion or gender, means "no one can tell me what to do? Nope, they can't." Everybody wants to be his or her own boss.

However, when we become a Christian, we give up this business of being one's own boss. Again, remembering Jesus' words, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and*

... *follow me*" (v. 24). Jesus is the boss. But, there is a difference here. Jesus said in John 14:15, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandment.*" We are obedient to Jesus because we love Him, not because we must or because we are threatened, though, ultimately there is a threat of eternal dimensions.

Do you remember that scene from, I believe, the first "Crocodile Dundee" movie where Paul Hogan, Dundee, and Sue, played by Linda Kozlowski (You think with that name she is originally from Buffalo?) are walking the streets of Manhattan at night. Suddenly, three guys jump out. One steps forward with a pocket knife, threatening bodily harm if Dundee and Sue will not hand over all their money. Dundee just stands there grinning and looking at the guy while Sue is terrified. Sue is shocked that Dundee makes no move to hand over their money. She said, "He's got a knife." Dundee replied, as he reached behind his back to pull out a huge Bowie knife, the length of one's forearm, "That's not a knife. This is a knife." Remember that scene? And, the three would-be-robbers, then flee for their lives.

You see obedience to Jesus, following Him, is not just one of those unfortunate, inconvenient obligations. It is our lifeline to eternity. But, when we think that we ourselves can save ourselves, we are like those three would-be-robbers with the puny pocket knife. That puny knife is no weapon; it can not save us from our sin and God's wrath. Only by us being aligned with Jesus and the weapon of the cross can we hope to be saved. Jesus put it this way in v. 25: "*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*" There is no value in gaining the present world if the cost is loss of life in the world to come. Shakespeare, I suspect, captured this perspective when he has Richard III say, "My kingdom, my kingdom for a horse." Richard would forfeit his entire kingdom for a horse because without a horse he could not escape his enemies who were intent upon killing him. What good are our wealth, health and intelligence if they cannot save us from damnation? No, if we wish to be saved, then we must have Jesus in our lives. So, if it is our aspiration to be true disciples of Jesus, we must remember that He is the boss and we are his followers. And, yes, like Peter we will mess up. We will get it wrong. We will think we have the answers and know God's mind and presume to tell Him so. We may even believe we are God's little angels and then something comes along to upset our stride and, whoa, there is this demon that jumps right out of us. You know what I mean. Yet, Jesus does not get stalled in the present or our past. We cannot disillusion Him. One might have thought that after Jesus accused Peter of being Satan that Peter would somehow be punished, struck from the list of the privileged, but not all. For in the very next chapter of Matthew, Jesus takes Peter along with two other disciples up to a high mountain where Jesus is transfigured before them. That was no punishment, but a once in a lifetime blessing.

For Jesus, for God that which "will-be" forever overpowers the "what is." Yes, there is the cross, but three days later the resurrection follows. Jesus expects us with Him to look forward to the bigger prize and not the moment's discomfort. This is hard for us. We don't like pain and suffering. And, we shouldn't. But, somehow in the great mystery of God's design for his people, pain and suffering are the bricks and mortar of that palace of bliss, which awaits us in the future.

I made fun of the German theologians earlier, but there is one in particular, Jurgen Moltmann, whose thoughts are presently appropriate. He observed that faith in the coming glorious future, promised in Jesus, transforms the present (*repeat*). Hope has a way of doing that. Does it not? And, so at those times when our suffering and the demands of being Jesus' disciples seem more than we can bear, we would do well to remember what Moltmann once said and I quote, "God weeps with us [now] so that we may someday laugh with Him [later]."

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.