

Second Sunday in Lent
Year B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalms 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the relationship between God and man was defined by covenants. Last week, we heard about the covenant God made with Noah and today we have God's covenant with Abraham. Throughout the history of the Israelites, there were many more covenants, too many to count here. The common theme in all of them was how God was going to interact with the Israelites - either through what God would do for them or what God would refrain from doing. With Noah, God would never again destroy all flesh with a flood and then gave the rainbow as a symbol of that promise. With Abraham, the promise was that, even in his advanced age, Abraham and his wife Sarah would become parents of many nations because Abraham believed that God would make it happen.

God's means of interacting with the Israelites changed in the New Testament. No longer were the covenants based on agreements between God and the Israelites, but through the actions of Jesus, God's Son. But Jesus does not make this relationship easy. As we read in today's Gospel lesson, there are conditions set upon those who desire a close relationship with God. While the God of the Hebrew Scriptures made covenants with the people, telling them what God would, or would not, do in the relationship, Jesus lays out the hard truths of what is required in this new version of the relationship between God and man - that His followers will experience persecution.

First, Jesus explains what will happen to Himself - suffering and death at the hands of the Jewish authorities. This was not what any of the factions within the Jewish nation expected of their savior. The Messiah was to be a liberator which, in their eyes, meant the expulsion of the Romans and the restoration of an independent kingdom as they had experienced under David and, more recently, under the Maccabees. The Liberator was never supposed to die before this freedom was obtained. Whereas it is never expected that a student would reprimand his teacher in any culture, Peter's rebuke of Jesus was based in this mindset - Jesus was the Messiah and, therefore, had a mission of liberation to complete. Death was not part of that scenario.

The response from Jesus was equally harsh and set up the discussion of what discipleship and, therefore the new relationship with God, would be. Previously, especially in the Greek culture, the disciple was a passive student, sitting at the master's feet and absorbing all that the teacher expounded. Jesus turned this passive role into an active co-worker with the teacher and, as a result of being totally involved in the activities of the Master, susceptible to the same fate as the Teacher. Needless to say, many found this too difficult, and not what they thought they were signing up for, so they left. As long as being a disciple meant having a front row seat to the miracles and teaching of Jesus, they were on board. But this new requirement was too much.

Where does that leave us today? Do we confront the same requirement as the first century disciples? Are we expected to take up our cross and follow Jesus? And, what does it mean to “take up our cross”?

In a word, I would say, YES, we are expected to follow the same requirements as the First Century disciples. As we endeavor to negotiate this world, with all of its trials and confusion, we must do our best to follow the example left by Jesus and the disciples. While that might not mean persecution and death, it will probably cause us to experience situations in which we feel less than comfortable. Jesus ministered to the dispossessed, the outcasts, and the hated foreigners. Perhaps we can see a ministry in this. Who are the dispossessed, the outcasts, and the hated today? What might we do to aid them?

I am not going to delineate who might be represented in these groups now. But I do challenge you to consider who you think might fit these descriptions and then consider what you might do to provide them relief. Jesus was considered by many in His day to be a rebel, an insurrectionist. Those who aid the dispossessed today are often viewed in the same light, perhaps even by us. We, who have been privileged to live rather easy lives when compared with so many others, are being called upon to reach out to those oppressed in many ways, to walk with them as they seek a better existence - to love ALL God’s creation as God has loved us.