

# THE CONFESSION OF ST. PETER

“You Are the Christ!”

Mark 8:7-9:1

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. It was a turning-point question for those first disciples. It still is for people like you and me. “You are the Christ,” Peter said. And so do we. But there’s more to it than just what we say, for faith is never just a matter of words, it’s a matter of heart and soul and mind, it’s a matter of life. So what does it mean when we say that Jesus is the Christ? What does it mean to be a Christian?

There are some who say that for the Christian problems become opportunities, heartaches turn into joys, bad times seldom come and when they do, they pass quickly. Christians, they say, succeed in whatever they do, careers skyrocket, relationships abound, money flows like water. God, they say, spares His people from pain, problems, and paucity.

Of course, such a picture of the Christian life is not only unrealistic, it borders on heresy. If the life of a Christian were as I just described it, then every one of us here today would probably have a good reason to wonder if we were Christians at all, for I doubt whether that’s been our experience. And while it’s true that faith in Jesus as the Christ does bring many blessings, it’s also true that it brings a measure of suffering, self-denial, and cross-bearing as well.

Such things, though, are contrary to what we might like to think the Christian life should be like. They certainly were for Peter in our text for today. Jesus was saying things that Peter just didn’t want to hear. He hadn’t joined up with the expectation that the Christ would suffer, be rejected, and die. In fact, those ideas seemed so foreign to his way of thinking that he even rebuked Jesus for saying such things. Certainly there must be another way, a better way, he thought. “Why not use the power you’ve demonstrated in feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and casting out demons, to drive the Romans from our land and restore the Kingdom of Israel to its rightful place in the world’s scheme of things, Jesus, and, oh yes, by the way, I’ve given up a lot to follow you, including my fishing business – certainly you could do better than suffer and die, at least for my sake.”

But Jesus would have none of it. “Get behind me, Satan,” he said, “for you don’t have the things of God in mind, but the things of man.” And then Jesus said to all who would listen, here are the things of God – “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For if you want to save your life according to the world’s way of thinking, in God’s way of thinking you will just lose it, but if you lose your life according to the world’s way of thinking for me and for the sake of the Gospel, according to God’s way of thinking you will save it. To the world, you see, winning is winning for our own sake, but to God’s way of thinking, winning is losing for Christ’s sake.

As we struggle to be what we are – the children of God through our baptism into Christ – life can be hard. For as Christ has suffered for us, so also his followers suffer in his name. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor martyred in Germany during World War II, once wrote, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.” Perhaps more than any of us, our Christian brothers and sisters living under anti-Christian regimes around the world understand the truth of that statement. Many are ostracized, many are imprisoned, and many die for the sake of Christ and His Gospel even today.

Now we may or may not have experienced any of that but, in our own way, we suffer too. We suffer as we try to live a moral life in an immoral society. We suffer through self-denial as the ethical Christian businessman or woman stands up for what is right and not just for what is expedient. We suffer through our cross-bearing as we care for the homeless, the hungry, and the poor at the expense of our time and talent and treasure. We suffer through rejection, exclusion, and even ridicule as we seek to follow this Christ day by day, to be faithful to our confession of faith.

The first Christians counted self-denial, cross-bearing, and even death itself not as a burden or a misfortune but as a great honor, even as a blessing, for in such things they bore an even more effective witness to Christ who denied himself, took up his cross and died for them. Tacitus, a Roman historian during the time of the planting and growing of the early church marveled on more than one occasion over how Christians suffered and died by being torn to pieces in the arenas by wild animals, by being set ablaze on standards, and by being crucified along the streets, with smiles on their faces, songs on their lips, and joy in their hearts. This is not to say that they sought such suffering and death but when it did come, when self-denial and cross-bearing brought such things, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to share these things on account of Christ.

How about us? We too, like Peter, have made a good confession of Christ and our faith in Him. We may not be put to death for that faith but are we truly denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following him? Are we true followers of Jesus Christ or are we just fair-weather friends?

Our text for today ends with a warning from our Lord, a warning that we all would do well to heed, “if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, I will be ashamed of him when I come in my Father’s glory, with all the holy angels.” In Christ, there is both forgiveness for the past and power for the future. – forgiveness for the repentant sinner and power for the courageous follower. In Word and Sacrament, Jesus stands ready again to re-create us, to remake us, and to re-empower us in our daily living to follow him. He gives us the Spirit to lean on and to help us do exactly what he calls for us to do – to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him. There is no other way. For he who seeks to save his own life will lose it and he who loses it for Christ’s sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.

That’s what it’s like to confess Jesus as Christ and that’s what it’s like to be a follower of his, a Christian. In Jesus’ name. Amen.