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TOPIC: DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK  
*Five Conferences For The Lenten Season*

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## INTRODUCTION

"I go to attend Mass on Saturday evening to fulfil my Sunday obligation, so that I can be free on Sunday.... The reason I attend mass on Saturday, is that Mass is short, the homily is short, there is no prolonged singing, no big crowd, and also there is always plenty of room to park my car". This was expressed to me in a conversation by a lady during my Saturday apostolate.

Many people think, like this lady, that to be a Christian means to become vaguely religious. We start to go to church and do "religious" things like praying the rosary, reading the Bible and doing novenas. Although Christians do all these things, they know that being a disciple goes far beyond that. To be a follower of Jesus does not mean hiding inside the church away from the difficulties of life. Quite the opposite. Being a disciple means following Jesus in the way we live the whole of our lives.

The following of Jesus is called **THE WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP**. And "**DISCIPLESHIP**" is one of the important themes in the gospel of Mark, through which Mark gives a beautiful and challenging understanding of the way of discipleship. In these pages, there are five conferences grouped under a title - "**DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK**". Now this title suggests that in all the five conferences I use the gospel of Mark. This is of course correct. However, since these talks are aimed at pastoral situations, I have illustrated the conferences from other sources.

Finally, I am sure and convinced that through the gospel of Mark one can come to a very good understanding of what it means to be a disciple and to be a committed follower of Jesus. And these five conferences are geared to this goal.

## THE VOCATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

### INTRODUCTION:

It is important, before we reflect on the theme of our talk "**The Vocation to Discipleship**," to say that Discipleship is an important concern of Mark, in his whole gospel. Another most important aspect, which one cannot skip over, is that when the Markan Jesus first speaks, (1:14-15), he announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God and summons people to "**Repent and Believe in the Gospel**." Mark helps us to understand this as part of Jesus' basic message addressed to all those who hear his preaching, even today.

"Repenting and Believing" involves a radical conversion from all that is evil and a total commitment to God. It is unconditional, once-for-all, affects the entire person and is addressed to all without distinction, that is, to all the human race. The positive side of this complete commitment to the will of God is **Faith**. Faith implies obedience, trust and hope (which are important for a disciple) as well as acceptance of the "Good News."<sup>1</sup>

As I see it, this call to repentance and faith focuses on the Kingdom of God as the content of the Good News; and the call of Jesus, which we shall see soon in the "**Call Stories**," focuses on **personal attachment to the person of Jesus**, which is a call to Christian Discipleship.

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<sup>1</sup>Denis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey With Jesus: Discipleship According To Mark*, (Good News Studies 22; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), p. 14-15.

## THE CALL AND THE INITIATIVE:

In all religions and different philosophical schools we come across stories of individuals being called to discipleship or rather being attracted, that is, to be disciples of that particular religion or school. In India, for example, Buddha had his own followers; likewise in ancient Greece, the Stoics, Plato and other schools had their own students or followers, and this we find in all cultures. During the time of Jesus, there were Rabbis and they had followers who were of course sought by the Rabbis themselves. The Gospels contain similar accounts of the miraculous effect of **Jesus' call to Discipleship**. What distinguishes these narrations, however, is the importance placed on the initiative of Jesus and the demand for an immediate and unconditional response on the part of the disciple (1:16-20; 2:14; 5:18-19; 10:17-22).<sup>2</sup>

What is surprising is that there is not a single instance in Mark of an individual successfully volunteering to become a disciple. So it is to be kept in mind, while reflecting on this theme, that one can become a disciple only on the basis of a **Call**. This we find in the "Call Stories."

"The initiative in the first call story, that is, **The Call of the First Disciples(1:16-20)**, is taken by Jesus. These fisherman, whom Jesus encountered as he made his way along the

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<sup>2</sup>Hans Weder, *Disciples, Discipleship: The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol.2, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p.208.

shore of the Sea of Galilee, were not seeking to join him. In fact, they do not appear to have been seeking anything. When Jesus met them they were simply engaged in ordinary tasks... casting and mending their fishing nets. Similarly, when Jesus came to call Levi, he found him busy with his duties as a tax collector."<sup>3</sup>

Mark appears to be making a point here about God's unexpected grace. What is implied is that we should remember that God takes initiatives or rather chooses to work through specific individuals and groups to accomplish his purposes. God seems to address his call to ordinary people as they go about their daily lives. We find this in the life of the prophet Amos. "I was no prophet" said Amos "neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit; and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and said unto me, 'Go prophesy unto my people Israel'"(Amos 7:14,15).<sup>4</sup> To our further understanding, David is still another example for us. As he was looking after the sheep of his father Jesse, he was called and was anointed King of Israel by Samuel. So we see that this invitation is not something one earns, but comes from God. Therefore, the call of God can come to us, not only when we are in God's house, not only in a secret place, but in the middle of our day's work. That is why, in the call of the first disciples, Mark highlights the gratuitous nature of God's call.

### THE CALL OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES (1:16-20):

In the call of the first disciples, Mark brings out the nature of Jesus' call and of the

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<sup>3</sup>Denis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey With Jesus: Discipleship According To Mark*, p.18.

<sup>4</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1971), p. 19-20.

Christian response, to show what **"Following Jesus"** means, to show in a concrete way what such a new commitment could mean. In the call of the first disciples we see that "both callings are modeled on the call of Elisha by Elijah (I Kings 19:19-21); the prophet's call involved for Elisha a break with his family and his occupation. According to First Kings, Elijah finds Elisha busy plowing. He casts his mantle on Elisha as a sign of his call and immediately Elisha follows him. Elisha then asks for and receives permission to say goodbye to his parents. Once he returns, Elisha remains faithful to Elijah until the latter's ascension. Like Elisha, the disciples of Jesus leave everything and follow their master. Once the call to follow has been accepted, Jesus' disciples, like Elisha, remain faithful<sup>5</sup>.

If we look at the call stories in Mark we find that Jesus, in all cases, first looked at the persons and then called them to follow him. At this point we should understand that the call of discipleship always begins with **Jesus looking at a person and calling him**. We also know from the account of Mark, that those who were called have had no specific preparation, nor have they even been among those who heard Jesus preaching. This conveys to us that Jesus does not call or encounter persons from some special religious sphere, but from the midst of everyday life where they really live.

All of us are made disciples by the call of Jesus, which is as powerful as the creative Word; as the Psalmist puts it " For He spoke and it came to be; He commanded and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9).<sup>6</sup> One cannot resist once the call of Jesus has come. One of my companions was sharing with me about his vocation. After secondary school he felt that he has been

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<sup>5</sup>Denis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey With Jesus: Discipleship in Mark*, p.21.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Schweizer, *The Good News According To Mark*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1972), p.48.



called to be a priest but he neglected the call. He completed his university studies and worked for seven years and finally when he could not resist the call of Jesus any longer, he decided to join a Religious Order. So the call of Jesus to each one of us should find a response and bear fruit. We are assured that "whatever those who are called may become, will be the work of Jesus."<sup>7</sup>

The word **"follow,"** very frequent in Mark, is a technical term for discipleship. This word "follow" received a new resonance from Jesus, a resonance which is found nowhere else except once in the Old Testament (I Kings 18:21), where the prophet Elijah declared that one must follow either Baal or YAHWEH. It is true that the verb "to follow" can be understood literally, as **"to accompany, go after, or go along with a person in time and place,"** or metaphorically or religiously, as **"to follow someone as that person's disciple."**

Another aspect which Mark emphasizes is that the call is at once followed by the response of obedience. The response of the disciple is an act of obedience. It means that the cause behind the immediate following of Jesus is a direct response to Jesus himself. For instance, it is Jesus who calls, and because it is Jesus, Levi follows at once (2:16 f.). The main stress is on obedience to the call of Jesus.

Mark uses simple phrases in the call stories, which we often overlook; he tells us that Jesus called fishermen as he was "passing along by the sea of Galilee"(1:16). Here I see that Mark wants to show us that discipleship seems to be dynamic and not static, to involve mobility. This we see even in the call of Levi - "...and as he passed on, he saw Levi..."(2:14).

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

In another call story, "The Selection of the Twelve"(3:13-19), we read "... And He appointed twelve, **to be with him...**"(3:14). The phrase "to be with him" is an important one. They were called to an exclusive attachment to his person, that is, to be with him. "Being with" Jesus involves seeing his works and hearing his words<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, disciples of Jesus must be committed to his Person. Disciples of Jesus are committed to his person by attentively listening to his invitation, by being his constant companions, ready to give themselves generously without fear, by responding to his call daily, that is, to follow him closely and never forgetting to recognize the privilege of being called to be his disciples. In one word, to identify with him.

## CONCLUSION:

What can be said briefly is that Mark has put the call stories at the beginning of the gospel to emphasize the call to discipleship. What do these call stories tell us today? In all the call stories we find the same elements, on which we should reflect constantly:

**-It is Jesus who calls.** We have seen in the call stories, that the initiation comes from Jesus. Mark seems to make a point about God's unexpected graces as we have seen already. Today we come across, men and women, usually seen as unlikely candidates by the people, who are chosen by God, not because they are already holier than others, but in hope that they will cooperate with Him for the accomplishment of His will.

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<sup>8</sup>Donald H. Juell, *Mark*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), p.61.

**-This call requires the kind of obedience that entails forsaking old ties.** When Mark says that the call requires some kind of obedience, we should not look at it in a negative way. I know, today the word obedience has rather negative overtones. It can be easy to think of Jesus as some kind of dictator who wants to take away our freedom and make us obey him. Jesus is not like that at all, and he certainly did not treat the first disciples in that way. He wants us to stand on our own feet and learn for ourselves what it means to follow Him.<sup>9</sup>

Here we need to make a firm decision. There is no turning back and no more clinging to old ties. This we saw clearly in the case of Matthew, with one action in one moment of time, by one swift decision, he had to put himself out of his job forever; for having left his tax-collector's job, he would never get it back again<sup>10</sup>. When we want to respond to the call of Jesus we have no other option than to say no to our old ways.

**-The call that Jesus issues is one that involves service and attachment to his person.** We must not forget what Jesus offered to his first disciples. He offered them a task. He called them not to ease but to service. So Jesus called them to a task in which they would spend themselves and burn themselves up, and in the end, die for his sake and for the sake of their fellow people. Another important thing for us to remember as disciples of Jesus is that he called his disciples **to be with him**. That is to say, he calls us to be his steady and constant companions, that is, we have to identify our lives with his life; we are called to live with him all the time. The call to "be with" Jesus, is also a call to listen to him by reading

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<sup>9</sup>D. Watson and S. Jenkins, *Jesus Then And Now*, (England: Lion Publishing, 1983), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p.48.

the scripture and meditating and experiencing his love for each one of us.

Secondly, the call to repentance and faith must be always kept in mind. What is involved here is a **radical conversion**. We must abandon our old way of life and totally commit ourselves to the person and work of Jesus. Nothing must stand in the way of our exclusive relationship with Jesus, neither possessions, nor occupations, nor relatives...

The lesson we get from this theme is that those who are included among the disciples of Jesus are individuals who have been called by him. What Mark wants to convey to us is that more often than not this invitation comes to us during our normal daily activities. We must also remember that those chosen to receive this call to follow Jesus appear to have been rather ordinary individuals. Let us remember how Paul asks us to consider our call. He says, "For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards; not many were powerful; not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). Though we were not worthy of the call, through his gratuitous gift all of us are called to enter into an intimate relationship with him.

## MISSION OF A DISCIPLE

### INTRODUCTION:

There is story about a young, newly ordained priest about to preach his first sermon in his new parish. Naturally, he wanted to impress everyone, so he spent hours preparing. He was living with his old grandmother, who was very proud of him. On Saturday night he talked about the sermon with his grandma. Grandma said to him, "You'll say what is right and everybody will be pleased with you. But, oh! Tom, be sure and say a **good word about Jesus.**" Hearing that Tom tore up the sermon which he had prepared and started all over again. As he wrote, he came upon a whole new understanding of the Christian Reality: that one of the most fulfilling and most creative things he could ever do is to say a **good word about Jesus.**<sup>11</sup>

"Mission of a disciple" is the theme of our reflection. We may ask, what is this mission of a disciple all about? Mark tell us that it is a **good word for, or about, Jesus,** especially about his great love for us all. In a nutshell, the mission of a disciple is to proclaim the Good News. This is the core of the mission which we often skip over like that priest who had neglected to say a good word about Jesus, or to speak about the Good News.

We see in the life of St. Paul that his whole apostolic life was to say and write good

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<sup>11</sup>Emeric Lawrence, *The Holy Way*, (Collogeville: The Liurgical Press, 1990), p. 185.

words about Jesus and prove the good words with good works. Let me quote what he says to the Ephesians. Paul says "...to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God." That's what Mark wants to tell us; that Jesus was sent by the Father into the world to reveal the love of the Father; and, in return, the disciples were sent on a mission to do the same, in a way to continue to do what Jesus was doing - preaching the Good News, healing the sick, forgiving sinners and so on. This is the aspect we will be looking at in the theme - "Mission of a Disciple."

Mark throws light on the mission of a disciple in at least two places: In one place, where Jesus appoints his disciple to be with him and to be sent out (3:13 f). And the second, the missionary Charge of the twelve, where Jesus actually sends them out (6:7 f.). These two passages have a lot to say about the mission of a disciple. Let us look at these passages.

### **THE CHOSEN COMPANY:**

"And he appointed the twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach, and have authority to cast out demons" (3:14-15). Here we see that Jesus chooses men on whose hearts and lives he writes his message, the Good News and that they could go out to preach that message to the whole world.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus called them to him for two purposes. First of all, he called them to be with him, to be his steady and consistent companions. In a concrete way, the twelve were to identify

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<sup>12</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 68.

their lives with his life; they were to live with him all the time. Secondly, Jesus called them to send them out. He wanted them to be his representatives. "There is a Rabbinic tradition, that the representative/messenger/ambassador is like another self of the original sender."<sup>13</sup> As we know, the representative has a personal bond with the sender, which means an awareness of mission, a sense of being commissioned with a message, and, at the same time, a bonding with the recipients of the message. In our own country, for instance, we have ambassadors from different countries representing their respective presidents and countries. Similarly, Jesus wanted his disciples to be his representatives, to tell others about him, his message, the Good News.

At this juncture, Mark wants to convey to us a clear message. That is, the heart of the apostolic call has two dimensions: prayer, to be with Jesus, and mission, to go out and preach, to be sent out to proclaim the Good News. One dimension without the other will destroy the essential nature of the call of a missionary. It is well to remember that the Church has two patrons of the missions, St. Therese, a contemplative who is the patroness of missionaries, and St. Francis Xavier, a missionary, also patron of missionaries. This is to emphasize both dimensions, prayer and apostolate.

#### **THE MISSIONARY CHARGE OF THE TWELVE (6:7-11):**

Now let us see what the missionary charge of the twelve has in store for us. We are told that Jesus actually sent his disciples into the field to proclaim the Good News. One thing

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<sup>13</sup>Teresa Clements, *Missionary Spirituality: For The Praise of His Glory*, (Dublin: Carmelite Centre of Spirituality, 1987), p. 18.

is evident to me, the purpose of this mission, was to give some practical training in missionary work by way of preparing them for later responsibilities.

This is almost like sending seminarians, after their second or third year of theology, out for a "Pastoral Year." Or, as in African tradition, before one could reach the stage of adulthood, one is initiated and given training so that he may act as a responsible person in society.

"Jesus called to him the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits" (6:7 f.). Jesus sends them well equipped, not with material possessions or daily necessities, but with a message and power over the unclean spirits. They had the task of passing on the message and using the power to heal, for the sake of the Kingdom of God. They had something to give, something to teach, something to proclaim. And this they could do only because they had been given it. As Barclay says in his commentary on Mark's gospel, "A wise man once rightly said that no man has any right to be a teacher unless he has teaching of his own to offer, or the teaching of another that with all the passion of his heart, he wishes to propagate."<sup>14</sup> In the case of the disciples Jesus gave them something precious which no power on earth could give, so that they may share it with all the people of God.

Among the many aspects of mission in Mark, I would like to draw your attention to the aspect of trust or reliance on God alone for all needs. When a disciple was sent on a

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<sup>14</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 70.



mission Jesus instructed him; he strongly emphasized simplicity.<sup>15</sup> Jesus told them not to take anything except a walking stick, a tunic and a pair of sandals. Mark seems to emphasize that missionary work involves travelling as lightly as possible. What we can conclude is that a missionary who travels without any provisions,... **"is a sign of a life that is like that of the "birds" and the "wild flowers,"** of whom our heavenly Father takes care, **in which there is no reliance upon one's own means.**"<sup>16</sup> The disciples had to rely solely on those people to whom they were sent. Their lifestyle itself had to convey more than they could tell by their words. As we have heard very often "actions speak louder than words." In this way they had to be signs to the people to rely on God alone.

The disciples who were sent on a mission had to rely on God alone, like Jesus, and imitate him. In other words, Jesus had a mission from his Father and did exactly what his Father was doing. He did not carry any thing with him. He relied on God alone for all his needs, which of course were met through his disciples and people. In a way, Jesus was instructing his disciples to copy him, to take him as a model and the continue his mission.

## CONCLUSION:

As we are making our journey with Jesus, especially during this lenten season, we should ask ourselves, what does our Lord wants to teach us today? What does the mission of Jesus mean to each one of us? Do we have a mission? In what way can I continue the

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<sup>15</sup>R. Alan Cole, *Mark: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, (Leister, England: Inter - Varsity Press, 1993), p. 169.

<sup>16</sup>Edward Schwiezer, *The Good News According To Mark*, p. 130.

mission of Jesus? Each and everyone, especially we baptized Christians, have been sent to convey a message to this troubled world.

Leaving home, family and country to proclaim the Good News of Christ has always been part of the Christian experience, and never more so than in the twentieth century. We have heard and know of the great missionaries of past centuries and the present, who left their homes for Christ's sake and brought to us the Good News. It was the love of Christ, and their seeking of Christ, that was the impulse behind their movement. And we, each one of us, are invited to pass on this Good News to others.

As we are looking at Mark's idea of mission, we realize that by the fact that we are Christians, we are disciples of Christ who have been entrusted with a mission. Therefore, I see that each and everyone is called to be missionary, to oneself, to one's own locality and to the world at large. Some of us are called to go out far away, to leave our home and country, like St. Francis Xavier, St. John Britto, Daniel Comboni, Mother Teresa and others. Still some others are called to be missionary at home and in their own locality.

What do I mean that one has to be missionary to oneself? It looks a bit strange and Mark has no clear indications of this. As I was reading to get more light on the mission of a disciple, I found in the passage, where Jesus appoints his disciples, that he appoints his disciples to be with him and to be sent out. Jesus did not send them out just like that. He called them to be with him, to accept him, to proclaim him in their hearts, to proclaim his message in our small world.

I think to be a committed missionary, first, we need to proclaim Christ in our hearts. I mean, to put it in a simple way, there are places in our hearts where Christ's message has not reached. For example, we are selfish, which causes a lot of harm to ourselves and to society. It is here we need to introduce Christ's message of love. I mentioned selfishness because it is the root of all violence, hatred, and all types of evils one can think of. It is only when we have Christ that we can give Christ to others. We cannot give to others what we don't have.

We should get it into our minds that to be a missionary doesn't mean that one has to leave home and country. Most of us are called to be missionary to our own locality and to our own homes.

This I could better explain by a short story. Some students were asked to write an essay about a missionary they knew. Tina got puzzled. She knew the names of the missionaries and had read about them; but Tina didn't know what they were like.

Tina, a twelve year old girl, wrote the following words: "The person I think is a missionary, and a good one, is my mother. This may sound peculiar but surely you don't have to be ordained to be a missionary. My mum's mission is to be a housewife and a mother to me and my family. My mum has never been selfish or put herself before her family. I have never been starved or been without her endless love. Just like the famous missionaries my mother has needed a lot of courage. I am very lucky to have a missionary mother."<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup>Anthony P. Castle, *More Quotes and Anecdotes: An Anthology For Preachers And Teachers*, (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1989), p. 177.

doesn't need my comment on how to be missionary in one's own place or home.

Before I conclude this reflection, I would like to say that there are people who proclaim the Good News in various ways. People try to bring healing, try to bring reconciliation, work for peace and many others things. For example, in the Carmelite Community, Nairobi, there was a "Reconciliation Session" for the Tutsis, who were refugees from Rwanda and Burundi. Therefore, each and everyone of us have a task to preach Christ's message to everyone, especially in those places where Christ has not been preached. It is not enough to say that we know the truth but we must help others to know it also.

## THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

### INTRODUCTION:

There is a game little children play, called "Follow My Leader." In this game there is only one rule - that no follower shirks going to any place where the leader has first gone.<sup>18</sup> During this conference we need to keep in mind our Leader, Jesus Christ, and have a constant desire to arrive at the place where he has gone first. But to go where our Leader is, there is no other way than to **Follow Him**, walk the path which Jesus himself walked. This will cost us; we may even have to die for his sake and for the sake of the Gospel.

To us Christians, the following of Jesus fills us with the hope of heaven, since our Leader has already gone there; but first comes the cross. And in Mark, Christian discipleship is none other than following the Crucified One.

There are a number of sayings, put before us by Mark, regarding the cost of discipleship. But we shall reflect on one saying which summarizes or covers all others. Jesus says, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (8:34). In this short saying, Jesus puts before us three conditions of true discipleship.

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<sup>18</sup>R. Alan Cole, *Mark, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, p.207.

## CONDITIONS OF TRUE DISCIPLESHIP:

"If anyone wants to follow me,  
let him deny himself,  
and take up his cross,  
and follow me" (8:34).

At the beginning of this saying, to our surprise, we find that **freedom** is emphasized. "If anyone wants to follow me" - in these words Jesus underlines freedom with which a person chooses to be a disciple. There is no compulsion, no force, or any kind of brain washing to influence the mind of the follower. In other words, when Jesus begins to unfold this inescapable truth, the conditions of true discipleship to his followers, he sets them free to choose or to reject him.<sup>19</sup>

This call of Jesus is left open to everyone. Which means this invitation was not only to his chosen disciples, but to the whole crowd who perhaps were following Jesus. Mark's main stress here is that the following of their master will be costly. "Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord's suffering and rejection and crucifixion."<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, this way of discipleship is not going to be easy, and one may be tempted to dodge from what it entails. So Jesus gives freedom to choose or to reject.

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<sup>19</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 77.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

## LET HIM DENY HIMSELF:

Among the three conditions for discipleship, "let him deny himself," is the first one. I think the people and the disciples who heard this for the first time must have been perplexed and confused. Actually, this referred to renouncing one's own self as the center of one's life. The expression very well could suggest, "let him lose sight of himself." To put it in the words of D. Bonhoeffer, "to deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us."<sup>21</sup>

To understand, what Mark wants to say, I would like to tell a short story. "A certain Lutheran bishop was imprisoned in a German concentration camp during World War II and beaten by an SS officer in order to extract a confession from him about his political action. The beatings continued to increase in intensity, but the bishop maintained his silence. Finally, the infuriated officer shrieked, 'Don't you know that I can kill you?' The bishop looked in the eyes of his torturer and said, 'Yes, I know - but I have already died.'<sup>22</sup> In the case of this bishop we see that he had already died to his own self.

Therefore, 'let him deny himself' means, not to be preoccupied with oneself and one's self-interests, but to have in mind only Jesus whose disciple one would be. As regard myself, I used to think that "deny himself" meant just self-denial, to abstain from certain luxuries. Mark goes beyond this understanding. He tells us that Jesus is not talking about the denial

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 77-78.

<sup>22</sup>Anthony P. Castle, *More Quotes And Anecdotes: An Anthology For Preachers And Teachers*, p. 267.

of things to the self. He is speaking about denial of "the self," making oneself not an end but a means<sup>23</sup>. The follower of Jesus must be willing to make any sacrifice even life itself, for Christ and for his neighbour, like John the Baptist, like that Lutheran bishop mentioned above, like Maximillian Kolbe who took the place of a fellow prisoner to die in a concentration camp, and like all the martyrs. So what must be renounced, then, is a narrow human way of thinking, so as to take on God's way and the values of the Gospel. And this involves total self-surrender or self denial.

To put it in plain terms, denying of self means "freedom from oneself and every security, whether the security be some earthly possession or the certainty of a claim upon heavenly reward. It indicates a freedom in which one no longer wills to recognize his own "I" - a freedom which is possible only when man commits himself completely to God. Paul calls it a crucifying of the flesh in a life of the spirit (Gal. 5:24 f.). John designates it as being born from above and not of the flesh (John 3:5 f.). Something like this happened when the disciples forsook boat, family, tax office, to accept Jesus' invitation to a life of discipleship."<sup>24</sup>

### **TAKE UP HIS CROSS:**

"Take up his cross," is the second condition of true discipleship. Here Mark probably has the cross of Jesus in the back of his mind, the cross which he carried and died on. So to tell a man that he must be ready to take up his cross was to tell him that he must be ready to be regarded as a criminal and to die.

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<sup>23</sup>Denis S. Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus: Discipleship According to Mark*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup>Edward Schweizer, *The Good News According To Mark*, p. 176.



There is no need for me to say that Jesus was a honest man. He was forthright and put in clear terms what it means to follow him. As we have often heard, it is said that great people are simple and honest. There is no doubt that the honesty of the great leaders has always been one of the their great characteristics. They never make false promises. For example, after the seizure of Rome in 1849, Garibaldi, the great Italian Patriot, made the famous proclamation: "Soldiers, all our efforts against superior forces have been unavailing. I have nothing to offer you but hunger and thirst, hardship and death; but I call on all who love their country to join with me." And in the days of the second World War, When Sir Winston Churchill took over the leadership of the country, all that he offered men was " blood, toil, tears and sweat."<sup>25</sup> By saying "take up your cross" Jesus sought to challenge his disciples and the crowd, like Garibaldi, so that they might be ready even to die.

As I have said earlier, the saying evokes the crucifixion of Jesus, so the faithful disciple must be prepared to follow his master even to his death. For Mark, Jesus' own passion and death is a set pattern for his disciples. It is a fact that Jesus never called upon men to do or face anything which he was not prepared to do or face himself. Jesus was not only ready to carry the cross, but he knew that he was going to face death. Here again, a disciple should know before hand what it will cost him. In this case, for Mark, "discipleship means following Jesus in the way of the cross, which includes a readiness even for martyrdom."<sup>26</sup>

We are called upon to carry our cross and suffer, keeping in mind our rejected and

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<sup>25</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 206.

<sup>26</sup>Denis S. Sweetland, *Our Journey With Jesus: Discipleship According to Mark*, p. 90.

crucified messiah. The cross has special meaning for us Christians. The cross has turned the values of this world upside down - it is indeed "scandal and foolishness," which Paul refers to in his First Letter to the Corinthians. As Mark told his community, he tells us too, that we must be steadfast in facing persecution.

### **FOLLOW ME:**

Mark keeps together the life of Jesus and the life of the disciple. The way of Jesus is the way of a disciple, and we can say that discipleship consists in walking or following the way of Jesus. This is the meaning of the verb "to follow" in the gospel of Mark.

We see that Jesus leads the way and the disciples are called to follow him; Jesus does not merely show or preach the way, he literally walks the way. As I understand it, the moment one decides to follow someone, one expects him to go first and lead the way. That's exactly what Jesus did, as Mark puts down clearly. Jesus walked the path of suffering; suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship.

Therefore, following Christ means being ready to suffer for the sake of Christ. "If we refuse to take up the cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow Jesus."<sup>27</sup>

So, denial of self and the carrying of the cross are the prerequisites to follow Christ. "Discipleship cannot be built around self-fulfillment schemes; the goal of life is Christ, not

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<sup>27</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 80.

self."<sup>28</sup> If one doesn't deny his own self and carry the cross, he will not be able to follow Christ. And one who doesn't follow Christ cannot be his disciple.

## CONCLUSION:

Let us look at our own situation. The fact is that no one escapes the cross. Everyone suffers in some way or the other. It is true that there are a great variety of crosses, the commonest one being sickness, worry about loved ones, disgrace, poverty, worry about the future, old age and so on. I think that the words of Jesus apply to everyone of us: "One must deny his own self, take up his cross and follow me" (8:34). It means that we give up the direction and control over our lives into the care of God, as Jesus himself did.

Let me not be too idealistic. It is true that we may not have the grace to die as martyrs, like the apostles and other Christian martyrs. But let me recall what St. Paul says in his letters - if the Christian is to be glorified with Christ, he must suffer with him and be crucified with him. This suffering and crucifixion, of which Paul speaks, could mean martyrdom, or any kind of affliction, or it could mean the daily struggle against native selfishness. Our denial of self and carrying of the cross would be our daily struggle against the selfishness of self. Here we see that Paul is in line with Mark, that is, to be disciple one needs to deny his own self.

Of our lives there could be said many things. I have tried to pinpoint only a few

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<sup>28</sup> Augustine Stock, *Call To Discipleship: A Literary Study of Mark's Gospel*, (Good News Studies 1; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982), p. 142.

things. If we are ready to follow Jesus Christ then, I think each one of us must say "no" to ourselves and "yes" to Christ. I must say no to my own natural ease and comfort. I must say no to every course of action which is based on self-seeking and self-will. There is no other way for me than to say "yes" unhesitatingly to the voice and the command of Jesus Christ. Then only will I be able to say with St. Paul that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. It is only in this way that I will live no longer to follow my own will, but to follow the will of Christ.

In our day to day life, we need to give meaning to our suffering. When it comes, remember it is not an accident, but necessary. It is not the sort of suffering which is inseparable from this mortal life, but the suffering which is an essential part of the Christian life. Finally, I recall the words of a preacher which still echo in my heart. He said, "It doesn't take much of a man to be a Christian, but it takes all there is of him".

## MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE DISCIPLES

### *THE PASSION PREDICTIONS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE DISCIPLES*

#### INTRODUCTION:

In this reflection on the theme "Misunderstanding of the Disciples," we will have more light on true discipleship. And to emphasize the true meaning of discipleship, Mark puts before us the disciples of Jesus in their very fragile humanness, especially people who lack understanding. For instance, each time Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection, one or more disciples misunderstand his teaching. This is what we will be reflecting on in a special way. We shall see all that Mark wants to show us, how Jesus makes his disciples to understand the path of discipleship.

On several occasions, as we see in the gospel, Mark stresses the faults or failures of the disciples.<sup>29</sup> For example, when Jesus was with them in the boat during the storm, when they feared and lacked faith in him, Jesus says, "why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (4:34-41). In another episode Jesus walks on the water when the disciples feared, and Mark

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<sup>29</sup>The passion predictions and the misunderstanding, faults, or failures of the disciples in Mark has been spelt out by most of the Biblical interpreters. See, for example, Augustine Stock, *Call To Discipleship: A Literary Study of Mark's Gospel*, (Good News 1; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982), p. 109 f; Denis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey With Jesus: Discipleship in Mark*, (Good News Studies 22; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), p. 52 f; Edward Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970), p. 163 f; W. R. Telford (ed.), *The Interpretation of Mark*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), p. 182 f; Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark*, (New Testament Message 4; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1990), p. 125 f.

concludes the they did not understand ... because their minds were obtuse. If we go through the gospel we will find Jesus asking even questions like "Do you still not understand?" I think Mark wants to exhibit the disciples' fear, lack of trust, anxious self-concern, associating them with a lack of understanding.

I think there is this lack of understanding because of the disciples' failure to identify Jesus correctly. Though they had lived with him and had seen what he was doing, still they were thinking of a political messiah like the Jews of their time.

With regard to the misunderstanding of the disciples, we shall look especially at the **Passion Predictions and its consequences for discipleship**. In the passion predictions, we will observe that Jesus himself is the model of discipleship. Jesus not only puts himself as a model but always tries to give a correct understanding of discipleship. After the passion predictions, for instance, we find episodes like the curing of the blind man at Bethsaida and the curing of the blind Bartiemaueus, where Jesus really seeks to give sight to his disciples, to cure their spiritual blindness.

#### **THE FIRST PASSION PREDICTION:**

Jesus makes the first passion prediction. We read in Mark, "And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). Peter had just made his profession of faith and identified Jesus as the **Christ at Caesarea Phillipi**. But Jesus expresses very clearly what it means to call him Christ and what implications there are for

the disciples. But Peter did not understand and perhaps out of good will began to rebuke Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

It is in this context, we see that Jesus tries to open the eyes of his disciples to a new dimension of his messiahship and a new dimension of discipleship. Jesus makes them understand the necessity of his suffering and death, and what significance these have for an understanding of discipleship.<sup>31</sup> Peter refuses to accept this necessity of suffering and death, and we find Peter rebuking Jesus. Here we see the disciples in Mark really struggling with a new revelation about the suffering and death of Jesus. At this they must have had a difficult time to understand Jesus and what following him requires.

The disciples must have been all the more shocked when Jesus said "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"(8:34). Here Jesus summarizes the whole teaching on discipleship which we have dealt with earlier.<sup>32</sup> Jesus speaks plainly about the three conditions for discipleship: First, "Deny himself" which means the disciples must place the needs of others at the center of their lives. Second, "Take up his/her cross" that is, the disciple must be willing to carry the cross of Jesus, even to the point of dying like a condemned criminal. And the third condition is "Follow Me," meaning, the disciple must remain close to Jesus, to listen, to learn and to obey him. This we have been reflecting in the topic "The Cost of Disciple-ship."

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<sup>30</sup>D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p. 125.

<sup>31</sup>Augustine Stock, *Call to Discipleship: A Literary Study of Mark's Gospel*, p. 146.

<sup>32</sup>These three conditions for discipleship has been dealt in the Conference on the Cost of Discipleship.

## THE SECOND PASSION PREDICTION:

Jesus makes the second passion prediction while he was teaching his disciples. He says "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise again"(9;31). And Mark says that the disciples did not understand the saying of Jesus and they were afraid to ask him.

After this passion prediction there is the total incomprehension of the disciples. Still they do not understand Jesus well and all he has been teaching them.<sup>33</sup> The disciples not only failed to understand but also were afraid. They were really without understanding for they immediately began to discuss who was the greatest among them. And Mark tells us that they actually had a dispute among themselves about which one of them was the most important.

For me it looks a bit strange, that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, speaks about his death, and here we find the disciples talking about their personal advancement. It is true that, "the human mind has an amazing faculty for rejecting that which it does not wish to see."<sup>34</sup> Their concern for their personal prestige, their own ranking among the twelve, shows how far they were from true discipleship, a discipleship which calls for renunciation of one's own self and the willingness to follow Jesus even to the point of losing one's life.

Here again, Jesus turns things upside down. He says, "If anyone would be first, that person must be last of all and servant of all..." Perhaps Mark puts this in just to emphasize

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<sup>33</sup>Denis M. Sweetland, *Our Journey With Jesus: Discipleship in Mark*, p. 61.

<sup>34</sup>William Barclay, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 227.



that humility and lowliness ought to be characteristics of the followers of Jesus. Jesus puts a child in the midst of the disciples and says "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me..." The placing of the child in the midst of the disciples is to show, not the attitude of the child, but the attitude of others toward the child. A child was considered unimportant and had no status during the time of Jesus. It is just such a person who must be the object of concern for the followers of Jesus. What is implied here is that the disciples of Jesus must be ready to serve each and everyone without any distinction. "Mark has made the point that the revelation of Jesus cannot be received by one who is not ready to enter into the spirit of discipleship and thereby become 'last' and 'servant.'"<sup>35</sup> Therefore, serving all, including the powerless and helpless, is serving Jesus and his Father. It is this type of service one is called to do in his name, if one wants to be follower of Jesus.

### **THE THIRD PASSION PREDICTION:**

In the third passion prediction, Jesus says "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and kill Him; and after three days he will rise" (10:33-34).

Jesus and His disciples are nearing their destination and, we learn from the third passion prediction, they are on the road going up to Jerusalem. Here we can imagine Jesus walking ahead, leading the way, while those who follow him are said to be astonished and afraid. And when Jesus utters his last passion - resurrection prediction, again there is the

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<sup>35</sup>Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark*, p. 144.

inability of the disciples to understand what that means.

What is surprising is that, when Jesus is so explicitly telling about his suffering and death, James and John come up with their own ambitions. Here James and John are interested in themselves. They seem to forget what Jesus had been telling them. On the one hand Jesus speaks about his death and resurrection and on the other hand James and John request special places in his Kingdom. "It was not a desire to be near Jesus at the moment of triumph which moved them to this request; they simply wanted for themselves the highest posts in the new kingdom. It was ambition, not loyalty, that motivated them."<sup>36</sup>

As we have seen in other passion predictions, the way of Jesus includes suffering and death prior to the glory of the resurrection. What we have got to learn here is that there is no other way to follow Jesus than to travel along the same path that Jesus walked. Although the disciples had journeyed with Jesus for sometime now, James and John had yet to learn that the way of Jesus is the way of the cross.

This provides an opportunity for Jesus to open the blind eyes of the disciples to the meaning of his suffering and death; and, of course, the meaning of true discipleship. It is here we find the last teaching on discipleship. Jesus says, "whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve..."(10:44-45). What Jesus wants to convey is that worldly greatness is not to be the way of his disciples. Therefore followers of Jesus are to reverse the usual practice whereby those in authority rule by force. Christian followers are

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<sup>36</sup>R. Alan Cole, *Mark, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, p. 168.

called to serve and not to lord it over all.<sup>37</sup> This is explicitly seen in Mark where Jesus came to serve and not to be served and to give his life as a ransom for many. That is how Mark ends his episode: putting Jesus as a model for discipleship.

## CONCLUSION:

The passion predictions and the misunderstanding of the disciples gives us insight about the nature and the destiny of Jesus, which lead us to a better understanding of our own Christian discipleship. In Mark we have seen that the disciples really had to strive to understand the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We must be experiencing similar things in our Christian life: the difficulties we encounter in understanding who Jesus is and what following him really requires. The above three passion predictions, followed by the three discourses on discipleship, enable us to understand the suffering of Jesus and what it is to be true disciples of Jesus.

Mark tells us that the followers of Jesus must value Jesus and the Gospel more than their own lives. If we really want to be committed disciples we must make a deliberate choice to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Just as disciples were called to lose their lives for the sake of Jesus so were they called to serve for his sake. Jesus served by literally giving his life for others. We must follow his example by seeing ourselves as last and least, not insisting on our own interest, but always being ready and willing to assist others in need. For I read a saying that goes, "greatness consists, not in reducing other men to one's service, but reducing

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<sup>37</sup>Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark*, p. 168.

oneself to their service."<sup>38</sup>

There is a caution for us that we must be willing not only to serve those who are important and powerful in the eyes of the world, but to serve the marginalised and weak in society. Today, as we examine our own lives, we see that we are good at pleasing those whom we like and those who can benefit us. We are invited to focus our eyes on the unimportant and powerless.

We are amazed that the disciples did not grasp that which was so plainly spoken by Jesus. Let us ask ourselves, are we so very different from the disciples? Over and over again we have heard the Christian message but do we allow it to shape our lives according to that Christian message? There is no doubt, there are parts of the Christian message which we like and which suit us best, but we refuse to understand the rest. We sometimes have different motives in our minds, like the apostles. Often we are confused and mixed up; sometimes we do not know what we want and where we are going in life. We can even apply to ourselves, what Kris Kristofferson says in one of his lyrics: "He is a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction, seeking every wrong direction, on his lonely way back home."<sup>39</sup> And that is what we are called to, to grasp the true message of Jesus and mould our lives according to the teaching of discipleship.

We also have the message that one's greatness depends on how much one serves. A

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<sup>38</sup>E. c. McKenzie, *14,000 Quips & Quotes For Writers & Speakers*, (New York: Greenwich House, 1980), p. 466.

<sup>39</sup>This quotation from the lyrics of Kris Kristofferson was mentioned by one homilist in the Carmelite Community, Nairobi.

clear example is that of Mother Teresa of Calcutta who is well known throughout the world. In the streets of Calcutta Mother Teresa was cleansing a leper and a man approached her and said "I would not do that for thousand rupees." The reply of Mother Teresa was "Neither would I, but I do it for the sake of Christ." True discipleship, then, consists in giving oneself to others.

Finally, helping others, rather than controlling them or using them, is the mark of Christian discipleship. The way of Christian discipleship is to welcome, to receive and to listen to every one in Christ's name, and for his sake.

## DISCIPLESHIP AND PERSEVERANCE

### INTRODUCTION:

I remember a lesson I had in standard four about "King Robert Bruce and The Spider." King Robert of Scotland, pursued after a battle in which he had suffered defeat by the enemy, took refuge in a lonely cave, and began to think out his plans. Tempted to despair, he had almost lost heart and decided to give up, when his eyes were directed to a spider in the cave, carefully and painfully attempting to make its way up a slender thread to its web in the corner above.

The king watched as the spider made several unsuccessful attempts to get to the top, and he thought, as it fell back to the bottom again and again, and still did not give up, that its efforts seemed to typify his own unsuccessful efforts to gain victory and rid Scotland of its enemies. He never seemed to get to the place at which he was aiming - just like the spider. But he continued to watch the spider's efforts and to draw hope from them.

The king took courage and persevered, and the example of the spider brought its reward. He went into battle and got rid of the English soldiers from Scotland. We find in the gospel of Mark a similar thing happening in the life of the disciples of Jesus. In our reflections we have seen that there is a negative presentation of the disciples by Mark, but this should not blind us to their positive attributes. In spite of all their shortcomings, the

disciples appear to believe that Jesus had something to offer them for which they leave everything and follow. Just imagine, they abandon everything, their occupations, relatives, and acquaintances, in response to his call. But there are instances we find in the gospels when the disciples were uncertain about their future: still they follow. This we find, for example, when Peter says "Look Lord, we have left everything and have become your followers"(10:28). What I would like to pinpoint is that although the disciples never fully understood Jesus, his goal, or the demands of discipleship, they remained with him until his arrest. We can apply to the disciples what Paul says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"(2 Tim. 4:7). Though they were discouraged and were often perplexed, like King Robert, they finally gave their lives for the sake of Jesus and the sake of the Gospel.

Time and again, we need to remind ourselves that persons who are called to be disciples and who respond to the call, have no other option than to walk the path, which Jesus himself walked. Jesus puts himself before his disciples as an example and model of true discipleship. So let us look at the life of Jesus himself.

One of the outstanding features of all that we have seen so far has been the never-faltering, leading, instructing and faithful presence of Jesus in the midst of failure. Even though the disciples have not been able to grasp all that was being demanded of them, Jesus has never left them. Jesus always hoped that his message on discipleship would gradually become clear to his disciples. The last appearances of Jesus and his disciples together in the gospel of Mark bring out the contrast between the loving faithfulness of Jesus and the failure

of the disciples to grasp all the implications of what it meant to "follow" Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

It was not that the disciples understood Jesus and his message within a day or two. They did not understand either Jesus or his message. But the surprising thing is that the disciples continued to follow Jesus with patience. Once Saint Teresa of Jesus said "Patient endurance attainth to all things"<sup>41</sup>. And Jesus never rejected them or sent them away. Jesus, too, bore with them though they never understood him even after their long stay with him. I remember a quote which goes "he that has patience may employ anything"<sup>42</sup>. The disciples continue to follow Jesus, and Jesus continues on to make his disciples understand.

#### **JESUS - MODEL OF PERSEVERANCE:**

In his gospel, Mark characterizes Jesus as a model of perseverance on our way of discipleship. This we discover in several places but we shall concentrate particularly on two places which are fitting during the time of lent: the last supper and the agony of Jesus in Gathsemane. I picked these two incidents because I see especially in these two cases the supreme courage to accept death and to do God's will. To do his Father's will was more essential than any thing else that Jesus could imagine.

Once St. Teresa of Jesus, Reformer of the Carmelites, was anxious about her health

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<sup>40</sup>Francis, J. Moloney, *Disciples And Prophet: A Biblical Model For The Religious Life*, (New York: Crossroad, 1980), p. 147.

<sup>41</sup>Anthony P. Castles, *More Quotes And Anecdotes: An Anthology For Preachers And Teachers*, p.12.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.



and the reformed convents. Deep within her consciousness she found the answer to her anxiety, a reply she attributed to God and recorded in her private notes: **"While one is alive,"** she quoted the divine message, **"progress does not come from trying to enjoy me more, but by trying to do my will."**<sup>43</sup>

As in all the gospel accounts, we also find in Mark that Jesus knew about his death. If we rationalize a bit, it was easy for Jesus to escape death if he wanted to, and yet inflexibly he went ahead according to God's plan. There is a saying that goes "Great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance."<sup>44</sup> This is exactly what we see in the life of Jesus. In spite of all the obstacles and "with full knowledge of what lay ahead, Jesus went on and accepted death."<sup>45</sup>

In the scene of the last supper, for instance, Mark underlines the theme of betrayal. It opens with Jesus referring to the betrayal of Judas: "One of you will betray me"(14:18). This little phrase communicates a lot to us and makes us realize the need of perseverance even if one of our close friends betrays us. Jesus not only knows that he will suffer and die, but he also knows who is going to betray him. I think that was a painful moment for Jesus, to discover that one of his trusted friends would be unfaithful to him.

Without a doubt, Jesus could have stopped Judas. All that Jesus had to do was to tell

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<sup>43</sup>J. Mary Luti, *Teresa of Avila's Way*, (The Way of the Christian Mystics 13; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 151.

<sup>44</sup>Anthony P. Castle, *More Quotes And Anecdotes: An Anthology For Preachers and Teachers*, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 351.

the other eleven what Judas was meditating and planning, and Judas would never have left the room alive.<sup>46</sup> But, Jesus goes ahead with the meal.

The last supper closes with the prediction of the future betrayal of Peter. What we find in that betrayal and failure is not limited to Judas and Peter. Jesus says "you will all fall away from me, for it stands written, 'I will smite the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered'"(14:27).

In spite of the betrayal and the repeated failure of the disciples to understand the significance of his death, Jesus makes a covenant with them. This covenant that Jesus made with them was not just a once-for-all happening, but it is to endure into an indefinite future. By this covenant Jesus promises his continuing presence with them. In other words, " Jesus came to tell them, that they were forever within the love of God."<sup>47</sup> Notice that his knowing about his death does not stop Jesus making a covenant with his disciples.

The agony of Jesus in Gathsemane, is very a familiar account to us, and so does not need much comment. Among all the gospel accounts of the passion, it is Mark who most stresses Jesus' human nature, especially in the scene of agony. In Mark we read, "...going little further, Jesus **fell on the ground** and prayed..."(14:35). "Jesus who had, up to now, almost casually contemplated and spoke about his fate, is here brought rudely face to face with harsh reality"<sup>48</sup>. The short prayer of Jesus in the garden gives us the whole message of

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 357.

<sup>48</sup>Wilfrid Harrington, *Mark*, p. 221.

perseverance, where Jesus says "Abba, Father, ... remove this cup from me, Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt"(14:36).

### **PERSEVERANCE OF THE DISCIPLES:**

Mark shows us the contrast between Jesus and his disciples, especially in the episode of the agony of Jesus in the garden. Let us look at this scene briefly and what Mark tells us about the disciples. Peter, James and John were asked to "keep awake." In fact, they soon fell fast asleep, while Jesus prayed. Here, Jesus faces his bitter struggle alone. Whereas the disciples fall asleep, they were being asked to pray that they might not fall in the struggle that will confront them. But everything falls on deaf ears. They could not even hear his word of warning. Mark tells us that "their eyes were very heavy"(14:40). They were ready to learn from Jesus to walk the path of suffering, but they fail at the crucial moment.

It was clear for Jesus after the struggle in Gathsemane, that the way of the cross was the path he was asked to walk. And so he says to his disciples, "Rise, let us be going"(14:42). Nothing could stop Jesus. He showed his disciples that discipleship is a way of life. It is not something that is achieved within a day or two, rather it is an endless fight and constant struggle.

The disciples who were ready to die for him leave Jesus alone and run away when Jesus is arrested. Though Peter followed far behind and went into the courtyard of the priest's house, he denied Jesus three times. He is like King Robert in the story, who lost many battles or like the spider which fell several times before it made a web in the cave, where the King

took refuge. Peter's and the other disciples unfaithfulness is contrasted with the faithfulness of Jesus, who remains true until death, who acts according to God's plan.

Let us look at Peter's denial, Peter, who was spokesperson of the disciples and one of the chosen three who was at Gathsemane. "Peter's first denial, directed to a maidservant, is a **pretense** not to understand, followed by an attempt to get away from the courtyard and from public attention. But the persistent maidservant pursues him, and so Peter is forced to deny his **status as a disciple** - he is not one of those associated with Jesus. A third denial intensifies the shame, for now Peter swears an oath that **he does not even know Jesus**. As Peter says this, he curses. If Mark means that he is cursing Jesus, truly Peter has reached the depths of degradation in his discipleship."<sup>49</sup>

We need to ask ourselves, are we ready to face martyrdom rather than deny or curse Jesus? It is always easy and convenient to follow Jesus when everything seems to go well; it is only when we are faced with difficulties and problems that we lack courage to continue to follow Jesus and to testify that we are Christians. When Jesus expects such a testimony from a disciple then refusal to give it is failure, or what we call sin.

We have often heard the saying "To err is human, to forgive is divine." "...Peter remembers Jesus' prophetic words about a triple denial, and he is moved to weep. Thus Mark does not finish the portrait of Peter without a redeeming touch."<sup>50</sup> All Peter can do is break

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<sup>49</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week: Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 26-27.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

down and cry, by which he proves that he is a disciple of Jesus. And I think this is where one needs courage to persevere.

The great lesson we have from Jesus and Peter is that one should not brood on failure, mistakes and halt there and give up, but to move on and continue the way of discipleship till the end. If one thinks again of future martyrs, the story of Peter should offer hope to those who failed and denied Jesus. I remember an old preacher who was asked to define Christian perseverance. He answered: 'It means, firstly, to take hold; secondly, to hold on; thirdly and lastly, to never let go.'

## CONCLUSION:

Let us imagine ourselves participating in a **Hurdle Race**. As in every game, a hurdles race has its own rules. In a hurdle race there are tracks, hurdles and the finishing line. Now if we acknowledge that our spiritual life or way of discipleship is like a race, we won't be astonished, terrified or amazed by the obstacles that come in our way of following Christ. I do not deny that in our daily lives we are faced with difficulties, diseases, frustrations and all kinds of crisis. I think these are part of our journey. Let us keep in mind that in a hurdle race hurdles are part of the race.

Let us throw back our minds to Jesus as presented by Mark and consider that Jesus is a hurdler. Jesus started the race, when he identified himself with the sinful humanity by undergoing John the Baptist's purificatory rite. From that time onwards Jesus experienced many hurdles before crossing the finishing line.

Satan in the desert was the first, soon after the baptism of Jesus. Satan tried to tempt Jesus by offering him bread, wealth and kingdom. In other words, Satan was telling Jesus to seek nourishment, power and self-reliance and ease apart from God. The pharisees, sadducees, chief priests were other hurdles in the life of Jesus. They called him blasphemous, a law breaker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners and so on. These were very disheartening criticisms which were other obstacles or hurdles.

Even his own friends, whom he had chosen, were again hurdles on the way to doing God's will. The disciples failed to understand Jesus, and his message; even they betrayed and denied him. In all these cases we see that Jesus kept moving, followed the right track, that is, doing God's will and overcame obstacles that he encountered before the finishing line.

The disciples too had started the race from the time they were called by Jesus. In our reflections we saw that they were discouraged, afraid and failed to accompany Jesus, especially at the last stage of the race, from the time Jesus was arrested. For the disciple who betrayed Jesus, money was an obstacle; to others, their lives were important, so they denied and deserted Jesus.

All the disciples made an effort to follow Jesus until his arrest. And Peter, who deserves to be mentioned, took courage to walk in, right into the high priest's palace. All of this shows us the willingness of the disciples to follow Jesus to the end, because human nature, fear of death, and selfishness come on the way as hurdles in the race before the finishing line.

As we continue our way of discipleship, our spiritual journey, we need to look at Jesus and the disciples and never give up when we are faced with barriers. Let us look at this journey as a hurdle race. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of an Olympic hurdler. We have started the great race. As we continue to run we will notice many hurdles: sudden death of an only child or a loved one, loss of a job, an accident that causes suffering and so on. It is during these types of misfortunes that we need courage to persevere and it is during these moments we have to continue our journey and be faithful to Jesus. "Your endurance will win you your lives" says Jesus.

Coming back to the hurdle race, can we imagine ourselves stopping the race to go to the judge and protest against the great quantity of hurdles? I do not think so. The judge will simply answer: "Sorry this race is like that." Therefore, all the difficulties and problems that we encounter in our life are part of our spiritual journey.

Also, do we think a hurdler who toppled a hurdle would withdraw and leave the track to weep over his error? Would he not rather continue towards the finishing-line? Certainly he would.

As we are on our spiritual journey and used a race as an image, I would like put to before you an American hurdler, who was in the lead in one event at the Olympic Games in Barcelona. She stumbled and fell at the last hurdle. She did not leave the track to scan the sky and say: "Why, my God? Why did this happen to me? Why have I lost the gold medal which was mine till the last hurdle?" She did not ask these questions, at least at that moment. On the contrary, she made a superhuman effort to get up and continue to the finishing-line.

I think God is not bothered about who is crossing the finishing-line first; rather He wants all people to reach the finishing-line, which is the gate of eternal life. We only need to keep going forward, springing over the hurdles of selfishness; because from selfishness, I personally think, sprout all the other obstacles which obstruct us in following Jesus with total commitment.

Before I conclude, I cannot but mention the great apostle of Christianity, St. Paul, who employs the metaphor of a race to describe his spiritual journey. He says "I haven't learnt all I should yet, have not yet reached my goal, but I am still pursuing it in the attempt to finally be all that Christ saved me to be. Brothers I am still not all I should be; I can only say that, forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus"(Phil.3:12-14).

So then, dear friends in Christ, following Jesus means that we are on a Journey. At the beginning of this Journey we will be far from being perfect followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus does not expect us to arrive at our destination as soon as we start. Like a journey, following Jesus is something that takes time. We make mistakes, we fail to understand, we do not want to face difficulties or do not want to accept sufferings, and at times we take wrong turnings, but if we are determined to follow him, we will grow and become mature.

As Jesus was patient with the unsteady discipleship of his first followers, so he is patient with us today. Jesus ask that we should be willing to follow him wherever he leads us.



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