

* As well as the season of Lent is a period of self-evaluation and self-judgment it's also can be characterized as a lamentation regarding our vulnerability to sin. The Gospel's lesson for today warns against a loyalty to live by the old way of selfishness. It produces in us a sense of grief as much as we continue to experience the power of the sin within us that makes us more sensitive as we again hear the uncompromised truth, "If anyone wants to become my follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me," (v.34). The tension between "must" and "can" is a matter to deal with. We agree with God's commands, but; can we keep them without failure? As a result we are painfully aware of our sin; our awareness might grow in us proportionally according to the degree of sin we committed. We might even be uncertain regarding forgiving something, we don't want to say anybody. By the way, "Will Jesus forgive someone's apostasy?" For a while we leave this question unspoken, but first, let's go through our text verse by verse.

* The Liberty Commentary for today's Sunday reading says that the verse (31) marks a turning point in the whole Gospel from Mark. It is now just a little over six months before the cross. From that moment Jesus began to teach them of His suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. But this is not what they wanted to hear! Instead of focusing on the resurrection and believing that, Peter, the chief of the disciples, began to rebuke, "God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you!", (Mt 16:22). He's saying, in effect, "Listen, Jesus, when I confessed you 'Messiah', this is not what I meant! Being the Messiah has nothing to do with failure, suffering and death! It's about being the king - about success and power and sovereignty. So let's have no more of this talk about suffering and death.

* Now it's Jesus' turn to rebuke Peter. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's." Hearing the name Satan we are immediately back in the wilderness of temptation, where Jesus has wrestled with flesh, Satan and the wild beasts. The substance of temptation has always been the same: to abandon the way of life and follow the desires of sinful flesh, Satan and his agents.

* The next verses of our text narrate some basic principals that explain the real meaning of life. Here they are: 1. "Deny himself;" 2. "Take up your cross;" 3. "Follow me."

* The principal, "Deny himself," is not about asceticism, or giving up your property. It is about self-denial of personal importance for the sake of Jesus' preeminence. The gospel was written for a community that understood Jesus' words in the light of upcoming persecution. Some Christians were hauled up before the courts, and, like Peter, being asked under threat of death, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" Literally it should be understood as "If you confess me, you deny yourself - because you will be put to death for it!" The ultimate cost of the discipleship is about denying his/her life for Jesus' sake.

* The second principal, "take up the cross" means literally death on a cross. It was a form of execution used by Rome for dangerous criminals. A prisoner carried his own cross to the place of execution, signifying submission to Rome's power. Jesus used the image of carrying a cross to illustrate the ultimate submission required of his followers. He is not against pleasure, nor was he saying that we should seek pain needlessly. Jesus was talking about the heroic

effort needed to follow him moment by moment, to do his will even if it might seem everything is hopeless.

Therefore the ultimate cost of the discipleship is about one's own volition to make a choice to die rather than deny.

* The third principal, "Follow me" is not the same what we read in (Mr 1:17) where it says, "Follow me, and I will turn you into fishers of people." In other words, there are people who *want* to hear Jesus' message, and he invites them to be part of spreading Good News that is eagerly received. But now this is a new journey - a journey of confrontation. It bears a deadly cost. And as Jesus enters this new phase of his ministry, the cost of the discipleship dramatically rose up, its value becoming equal to one's entire life.

* Reflecting on this subject I want to introduce to you the 3rd century Christian martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas, whose commemoration occurred yesterday, on March 7. Perpetua was a twenty two year old married woman, while Felicitas was her maidservant. These young women lived in the Roman province of Africa and suffered together at Carthage, about eighteen hundreds years ago. They suffered on a birthday-festival of the Emperor Geta. That time by imperial order all citizens were forbidden under severe penalties to become Christians. Because of this decree, the two women and a few others Christians were seized and thrown into prison. Perpetua had a baby whom she nursed while in prison. Perpetua's relatives, especially her father, begged her to give up her Christian confession; but she did not. When the trial of the five believers took place, all of them firmly confessed Jesus as the Lord. After refusing the protection offered by the Emperor to those who would sacrifice to the pagan gods, those Christians finally were condemned to be torn to pieces by wild beasts. On the day of the games they were led into the stadium. At the demand of the pagan mob they were beaten; then a boar, a bear, a leopard and a wild bull were set loose upon the men and the women. During that bloody show a pagan mob saw martyrs suffering under wild beasts but the mob did not see the martyrs asking them for mercy. Have you seen the point?

* The historical records also provide the facts of apostasy. Thus the so called Donatist Controversy took place because of a difference in opinions over the doctrine of martyrdom. The schism started in North Africa when it was alleged plausibly that one of the bishops who ordained Caecilian had apostatized, for this meant that the ordination could not been valid and that Caecilian was in fact not a bishop. If even the Church's fathers were not certain regarding this issue, what about us???

* Well, returning back to the rhetorical question, " Will Jesus forgive disciples who publicly apostatized him?, we should say: "Yes" and "No." There are two answers! For instance, comparing the outcome of Peter's and Judah's apostasies, I believe that Peter was forgiven, meanwhile Judah was not. When the Lord says, "For if anyone is ashamed of me and my words ... the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him ..." **But if a sinner repent and ask forgiveness the Lord will forgive such a person because repentance itself is the fruit of faith that alone with hope link us with promise,** "I will never leave you nor forsake you," (Heb 13:5). Significantly Judah Iscariot bore the name of his nation. Have you noticed this? And this person represents the entire character of his nation. This nation rejects Jesus as their Lord and Messiah. Judeans don't repent because they don't believe and they are not forgiven.

* But regarding us who believe and repent it is necessary to know that the Lord doesn't expect the disciples to

fulfill their commitments perfectly due to their weakness. He is ready to forgive but it is necessary to know and practice one thing; **Love the Lord from all your inside and your brothers in Christ Jesus**. Such love can do tremendous things!

* **The threefold principal as “Deny himself,” “take up the cross,” and “Follow me” is the key of our successful discipleship and it’s the way how we can express our love to the Lord.** Thanks to him who first loved us, (1Jn 4:19). He suffered, died and was risen from the dead for our salvation. These things come to us through God’s words, the Spirit and the physical signs of grace: the Baptism, Absolution, Lord’s Supper and Benediction. Holding them firmly we are able to deny ourselves and follow Jesus carrying our crosses individually and even helping to someone else. And the Lord whose love is beyond all understanding will preserve us in faith and love until the day of his coming.

Beloved, peace, love and grace be with you in your forgiveness.

Amen-Amen-Amen