

Today, Lord, I once again take up my cross and follow you. Shake me of my complacency; I want to live daily with an urgency to radically be the change you call me to be. Strip me of my comforts; may my love for you be a driving force to live with joyful surrender. Scratch out my schedule; I don't want my circumstances or timeline to influence my dedication and obedience to take up my cross and follow you. Here I am; Send Me.

LENT: DYING TO SELF IN ORDER TO LIVE

May your word pour out of me like water to the thirsty, and may my life be full of the fruit of the Spirit. All I am and have I give back to you with open hands knowing that all my needs you will meet as I go with you. Today I take up my cross and follow you. In Jesus Name, Amen.

As I considered our image of Jesus, I thought that sometimes we are guilty of wanting to him to fit into our image rather than us trying to be more like him. Here's a poem by Stewart Henderson called 'Splintered Messiah':

I don't want a splintered Messiah
In a sweat stained greasy grey robe
I want a new one
I couldn't take this one to parties
People would say 'Who's your friend?'
I'd give an embarrassed giggle and change
the subject.
If I took him home
I'd have to bandage his hands
The neighbors would think he's a football
hooligan
I don't want his cross in the hall
It doesn't go with the wallpaper

I don't want him standing there
Like a sad ballet dancer with holes in his
tights
I want a different Messiah
Streamlined and inoffensive
I want one from a catalogue.
Who's as quiet as a monastery.
I want a package tour Messiah.
Not one who takes me to Golgotha
I want a King of Kings
With curly waves in his hair
I don't want the true Christ
I want a false one.

Today's Gospel reading is a momentous story: a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. The moment it all changes...

The disciples are with Jesus in Caesarea Philippi, a village about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. And it was a fascinating village because it was sort of the 'retirement village' for Roman officials: the Door County of the Roman Empire! And it was built in a valley surrounded by hills at the foot of Mount Hermon.

As the disciples walked with Jesus through the village, they would look around them and see all the temples and the idols and the images of gods. Caesarea Philippi was thought to be the birthplace of the god Pan and there were temples and idols aplenty for Pan built into the hills. There were idols to the god Baal Hermon.

It was at that moment that Jesus chose to ask the disciples a simple question: **"Who do you say that I am?"**

In the midst of all the gods of the known world – who do you say that I am? And Peter turns to Jesus and says, "You are the Christ".

Perhaps Peter had known that truth for quite some time. Perhaps it was a realization that came upon him as they walked past the temples and the idols in the village. But either way, this was a moment of realization and declaration about the nature of Jesus Christ whom they were following.

And we can imagine the quickening of hearts and the sheer intensity of the moment as the disciples confront Jesus with this truth that has dawned upon them.

And Jesus doesn't deny it – and probably the disciples wanted to go out and shout the news to everyone, to introduce the people to the Messiah of God, and announce this good news to the whole world. But Jesus says something very puzzling in verse 30, we read: “Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.”

It was a stern response from Jesus. Some version of the Bible says, “He rebuked them not to tell anyone about him”. And they probably felt disappointed that they had to keep this a secret.

So, he wanted them to keep quiet about his identity. But he went on to talk to them, and this is where our reading starts, about how the Son of Man would suffer and be rejected and be killed.

And somewhat perversely we read in verse 32: “He said all this quite openly”. Keep quiet about the good news. Speak openly about the bad news.

And Peter is indignant about this, and we read that he began to rebuke Jesus.

Now it's his turn. And the same word is used here to describe how Jesus had warned the disciples just a few moments ago and how Peter is now warning Jesus.

But then it's Jesus' turn again: and the same word is used again in verse 33: “But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter”.

This is a heated exchange between Peter and Jesus, full of rebuke and warning on both sides.

And we can fully understand the human emotions involved here...Peter had spent many months with Jesus, watching him heal the sick and cleanse the lepers and cure the blind and raise the dead and challenge the religious authorities. Peter had spent many months with Jesus, watching the sheer strength of his ministry and the authority of his word. And now he was being confronted with a future filled with weakness and passiveness and vulnerability. And Peter didn't want that. He didn't want a Splintered Messiah. He wanted a strong God.

Like others in Israel, he was expecting a mighty leader from the line of David to overthrow the Romans and restore Israel politically.

The reality is, we are uncomfortable with a Splintered Messiah.

We all want a strong God too...When we are hurt in life, when we suffer loss, when we must put up with thoughtless words from others, when we are sick or dying, we want a strong God. We want a God who will heal us or justify us or turn our darkness into light. We want a strong God. But the problem is that we see strength from a very human perspective, not from a divine perspective. We understand strength to be the same thing as might, to be the same thing as vindication in the eyes of others. We understand strength to be victory. But that is a frail, human perspective. In the eyes of God, strength looks very different.

For God, strength is measured in vulnerability, in sacrifice, and by our willingness to endure all things in the name of God. That was the example Jesus – the Splintered Messiah – was about to show for his disciples, and that is how he wants us to live our lives too.

Verse 34: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

How we trivialize that call on our lives. How we manage to turn such a scandalous phrase into something so tame and so narrow-minded. “We've all got a cross to bear”: isn't that such an easy saying to roll off the tongue? But it is an incredible call on our lives from the man who was walking towards Jerusalem to be tortured and hung on a cross to die. Our Splintered Messiah.

I wonder if Peter felt let down at this point: I suspect so...

Up until then, there was a certain glamour in following Jesus: he was hanging out with the coolest superhero in Israel, the crowds flocked to them, the miracles never stopped coming, the teaching was amazing, and no doubt Peter enjoyed bathing in the reflected glory of Jesus. But now, that all changes. The glamour is gone, and Peter is left with the cold, stark reality of the pain of discipleship and the agony of realizing that if he truly wants to follow Jesus, he can't have it all on his own terms. There is a real cost to discipleship. It is Splintered Discipleship.

We can't have God on our terms. We can't create a cozy religion or a comfortable way of being. We profess a Splintered Faith. We are members of a Splintered Church. There is a real cost to discipleship: and it hurts.

There is a painful truth in this passage, that if we truly want to follow in the way of Christ, then our individual lives and our corporate church life will become more complicated. It's an uncomfortable truth but it is a truth governed by the knowledge that, as Jesus says here, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

And so, this is a passage, fundamentally, about our life, our identity. Where do we find our identity, as individuals and as a church? If we find our identity in our preferences or our comfort zones, then we will lose our identity because that is the nature of an impermanent, shifting world. That's what Peter was discovering. But if we find our identity, our life, solely in Christ and in the gospel, we will save our identity because Christ and the gospel are eternal.

I am constantly challenged every day of my life: and perhaps you are too, to differentiate between what is of God and what is of my ego. And sometimes, we can dress our ego up in such a way as to fool ourselves that our preference is of God. But I and I pray the truth is the same for you, we need to constantly be trying to lay aside the things of the ego and allow God to be at work in each of us. It's a cliché – but I must desire less of me and more of God: as I die, so God can live.

And that is what this passage is about – and what this period of Lent is about. Jesus was calling Peter into a place of self-reflection: to reflect deeply on whether he wanted Christ or whether he wanted his own idea of Christ. Does he want to be a disciple of Israel's superhero? Or does he want to be a disciple of the Splintered Messiah?

And we too are called into that same process of self-reflection throughout the period of Lent. What does it mean for us to die to self? What does it mean for us to die to our own ego? What does it mean for us to lay down our comfortable images of Christ and the church for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the gospel?

Our lives are Splintered. This Church is called to be Splintered because the splinters of carrying the cross of self-sacrifice must scar our bodies, scar our corporate body. We are called to constantly die to our egos and live to Christ and it hurts because the splinters dig deep.

"Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

We can't anticipate Lent by talking of Good Friday today. We can't anticipate Good Friday by talking of Easter Morning today. We can't anticipate Easter Morning by talking of the Ascension today. But we know how the story ends. The Splintered Messiah will ascend to the heavens, taking his splintered and scarred body into the presence of the Heavenly Father where Jesus will be glorified, because of his splinters, for all eternity.

I wonder if we can be courageous enough this Lent to embrace the splinters and the scarring and the pain of ego-death and self-sacrifice, knowing that we too will be resurrected in Christ and brought into the presence of our Heavenly Father for all eternity?

As Jesus says in this passage: "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." But the

risen Christ, in Revelation 3:5 has this to say: “Those who overcome will be dressed in white. I will never blot out their name from the Book of Life but will acknowledge their name before God and God’s angels.”

Our Messiah was Splintered – but he overcame and was acknowledged by his Heavenly Father.

Dying to self in order to live will make you feel Splintered today. This Church may be Splintered today. But we rejoice in the splinter-marks of the cross, in our bodies, in our corporate body, and, if we remain steadfast, we too will overcome, and our name will be acknowledged before God and God’s holy angels.

This Lenten season I choose to die to self to have: a Splintered Life; a Splintered Church; a Splintered Messiah. To the glory of God. Amen.