

Mark McCormick's Reflection at St. Joseph's Parish, Ottawa

August 23, 2020

Here we are on another mid pandemic Sunday, with the sheep still scattered; we are waiting to be gathered, hoping for a return to more typical times and rhythms!

Those feelings may be stronger still because a new year is around the corner- a new school year, that is, and I think everyone, whether in school or not, hopes to experience those familiar fall feelings- wistfulness for departing summer days, along with anticipation for new experiences that lay ahead in September and beyond.

Except this year those feelings are difficult to summon- we find ourselves stuck in mid-pandemic- full of fear and trepidation.

The readings today offer us a chance to situate ourselves mid pandemic. The disciples in the Gospel are at a midpoint in their journey with Jesus. Today, Jesus calls them and calls us to carry-on with the journey.

The readings focus on the theme of **leadership**. In the Gospel, Jesus addresses Peter in words that are familiar to us: "you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church". In the first reading, God rebukes one leader, saying, "I will thrust you from office and pull you from your station"! God replaces him with another leader who will be a truer leader to his people "I will fix you Eliakim, like a peg in a sure spot, what you open no one will shut, what you shut no one will open".

The psalmist suggests to us some of the qualities of good leadership, humility, hard work, strength and, somewhat surprisingly, surrender or submission. "God- please do not forsake me for I am the work of your hands" As Paul speaks to the Romans in the second reading, he acknowledges his own insufficiencies as leader and realizes his

dependence on God. “Oh, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!” he says. At this point in his leadership journey, Paul realizes he can only truly lead by following.

Today, Jesus proclaims Peter as leader of his church. We know Peter well from the Gospels- Peter, who a few weeks ago walked on water at Jesus’ encouragement, that is, until he began to sink, frightened by the whipping wind! Peter, who will soon journey to Jerusalem with Jesus and forcefully resist His teaching that the journey to come will carry with it pain and cost. Peter, who at the Last Supper protests dramatically that a leader like Jesus should not stoop to washing the feet of another. Peter, who goes on that very night to deny knowing Jesus not once, but three times.

Despite his sorry record of leadership foibles, missing the point and outright evasions, Jesus chose well. For Peter stood up, and was the first to do so- yes, perhaps out of bravado... Whatever- he stood up. Peter stood up and stayed standing up. He persisted in the journey even when he did not understand, even when the shame of one mis-step followed another. Peter persisted as he came to know his fixed point, Jesus. He was willing to follow even when the outcome was in doubt.

In Jesus’ passion and death, Peter followed. Wavering, he persisted still. In Jesus’ resurrection Peter too is transformed. Having witnessed the cost and the healing power of sacrifice, Peter experiences a powerful call to service. He is able to take up his own divinely-appointed mission and embrace his leadership journey. He will lead and follow the pattern of Jesus, his very human traits offered in the service of others.

Some of us today are fortunate to attend mass in person and soon in the Eucharist we will literally experience the Jesus pattern- his passion, his sacrifice, death and resurrection enacted before and among us. Our participation, even if we cannot make it to church today offers us the

chance to follow the Jesus pattern- offering ourselves in service, building and healing ourselves and God's family.

Whoever we are, whatever stage or station of life we are in, we are all called to be leaders. Our mission, too is divinely-appointed and awaits our participation. Our fears and our frailties are used by God- in facing them and in accepting them, we place them alongside our strengths and our passions- each of these essential elements in establishing and crafting our unique mission of service to others.

The canvas of need in our world is large. It's PRIDE Week here in Ottawa and leaders are encouraging us to proclaim loudly and proudly what we know to be true- every child of God deserves love in their lives- the love of another, the love of each other, the love of God! The structures of systemic racism remain in our country and as one politician said this week- "there is no vaccine for racism"- recognition of hard truths and hard work await us all.

In mid-pandemic September approaches and we recognize the leadership of teachers and education workers, custodians, administrators and bus drivers as they lead the way to creating safe places of welcome and learning for students. As with all front-line workers, their service is surely modeled on the Jesus pattern.

In all of this, in all these ways, may we like Peter, remain focused on the Jesus pattern, serving and leading our flock to greener pastures!

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St. Joseph's Parish, Ottawa
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