

Our first reading today comes from what is known as the suffering servant of Isaiah

Writings that are closely linked to Christ

In our Gospel last week, Jesus opened the ears of the deaf mute

Today, Isaiah tells us that his ears are open

There is more here than the simple physical ability to hear

These both infer an openness to God

To hear his word

To let it sink deep into our hearts

To be open to change that God's word may bring

To be open to His will in our life

This openness to God's will is then tested

He is beaten and shamed

We do not know why

Just that it happened

But despite everything that happened

He is confident that God is there

That God is on his side

This was at a time that suffering was thought to be a punishment from God

Isaiah gives us a new understanding

Very similar to the understanding we have from Christ

Suffering is not a punishment from God

It is not a cause for shame

It can even strengthen us

In fact, the cross is closely linked to Christ

So close, he tells us

Whoever wishes to come after me

Must deny himself

Take up his cross

And follow

Whoever wishes to save his life

Will lose it

But whoever loses his life for my sake

And the sake of the Gospel

Will save it

These contradictions were difficult for the disciples to grasp

They can be difficult for us to grasp

Why the cross?

Why is there evil in the world?

If God is good---

How can he allow this or that to happen?

These are challenging questions to answer in general

But when they strike close to home

When they affect me personally

They can threaten to smother us

How do we answer them?

Because we all will have to answer them at some point in our life

When we face an illness

An accident

The death of a loved one

How do we live lives of service to others?

Is it more about proclaiming our faith?

Or living it?

Or both?

How do we take up our cross?

How do we lose our life, so we can find true life?

Our answers to these questions are wrapped up in Jesus' question today

Who do you say that I am?

Is Jesus another John the Baptist for me?

A teacher of a moral way of life

But no more

Is he Elijah?

A mystical figure who tells us about the end times

Is he a prophet?

A spokesman for God

But not God Himself

Is he the Messiah?

The Son of the living God

But even here, we can be confused like Peter was

There are many understandings of messiah

A messiah could be a powerful king

An earthly ruler

It could be one who would defeat all enemies with military force

Is he one who contains all our hopes and dreams?

We can give it our preconceptions as well

If I were God

There would be no more abortion

There would be no more war

There would be no more cancer

There would be no more hunger or suffering

No more natural disasters

No more violence or terrorism

This list could go on and on

Each one of us adding to it what we see as unjust

But these things are allowed by God

We may not see the human reasons why

But we do know there are divine reasons why

So who do you say Jesus is?

Our answers will also reflect another question

Who do we say we are?

Because only Jesus reveals true humanity

Without Jesus, our vision of humanity is distorted

We see fallen humanity

We see the result of sin in the human person

But that is not what we were created to be

And only Jesus can show us who we are meant to be

Jesus shows us what we are called to be

Disciples following God's will in our lives

We are called to forget ourselves

We are called to take up our cross every day

We are called to follow Jesus' footsteps and do God's will

These three things

They are not that complicated

But they are challenging

St James shows us the path in his letter

He continues emphasizing the practicality of our faith

Faith without action is empty

It has no power to save

Our faith lives have to have a concreteness about them

They have to come alive with practical works

This is not to say that works save

Because works without faith

Are as empty as faith without works

It is a robust faith that leads to works

And doing these good works builds and strengthens our faith

Our faith and our good works are inseparable

Both lead to the building up of the other

Relying on either one without the other leads nowhere

So who you say that Jesus is?