

The questions that Jesus poses to his disciples in the gospel today are questions that come off the page and address themselves to us as well. “Who do people say that Jesus is?” Well for our followers in the pages of scripture, the answers were quick and rapid fire; John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. How would we answer that question? Jesus is Lord and Savior. God’s only Son. A superficial swear word in human conversation. A light house that guides people through the darkness and storms of life. You get the picture; There are as many answers to this question as there are people on the planet. The thing to remember about this question is that it is safe. To answer is to give a report of what was picked up in conversations with other people. But Jesus the teacher, then takes the question a step further: “Who do you say that I am?” Now the reporter becomes the reported. The answer to this will require some introspection and recollection. Who is Jesus in my life? He is big brother. A companion. The Body and Blood that we receive from the altar. A teacher. A shepherd. A friend. The central figure in our gospels. The answers are as varied as the person’s life

experience. One thing is for sure Jesus is the light that illuminates our darkness of this world and opens our eyes to the harsh reality of our life. Yes, I said harsh reality. When Peter takes issue with Jesus about his suffering, rejection, and death, Jesus lays it out for them and us plainly. This life on earth is no bed of roses. Life will be hard and painful and a struggle. And I quote, “whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Jesus is preparing us for the journey that lies ahead. Suffering and sorrow will be a part of that journey.

Hurricanes, tornados, school shootings, car bombs, divorce, cancer, poverty and other crosses will be with us, we cannot escape them. But then Jesus continues, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and the gospels will save it.” What Jesus is trying to say is that the suffering and the sorrow is not what is crucial, it is how we respond to them that matters. We can’t avoid the suffering but we can make something constructive not destructive out of our

response to it. The pain of our life can be life giving and it can make us and those around us better people not bitter people.

Take for example the life of the late Golda Meir. As a young girl in Milwaukee Wisconsin she was depressed over her appearance. She felt she was not beautiful. She wrote, “It was only much later that I realized that not being beautiful was a blessing in disguise. It forced me to develop inner resources. I came to understand that women who can’t lean on their beauty have to work harder.” Golda Meir accepted her cross without anger or resentment. She faced it and dealt with it, giving her the resources of courage and strength; Qualities which served her well when she became the first woman Prime Minister of Israel.

The author Oscar Wilde also struggled with his cross when at the height of his writing career he was convicted on a morals charge. After serving his time in prison he realized that he could no longer write superficial comedies. In the midst of his struggles he wrote two beautiful lines of poetry that captured his frame of mind. “Where sorrow is, there is holy ground” and

“How else is but through a broken heart may the Lord Christ enter in.” Oscar Wilde used his humiliating experience as an opportunity for maturity and growth.

We will all sooner or later find ourselves standing in the shoes of suffering and pain much like Golda and Oscar and we will have to decide whether we will move backward in bitterness or move forward as followers of Christ enduring our pain and suffering with a new resolve to survive. God uses hardships to fashion us into warmer, humbler, better people. Suffering and sorrow can open our eyes and our hearts to a richer more fulfilling life.

The poet Richard Browning Hamilton summed it up best in his poem *Along the Road* when he wrote “I walked a mile with Pleasure, she chattered all the way, but left me none the wiser for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow, and ne’er a word said she; but, O, the things I learned from her, when sorrow walked with me.”