

PENTECOST: A TIME TO BE FILLED WITH GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 17

August 31, 2008

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-18

The Path of Suffering

Last week's Gospel text focused on Jesus' questioning the disciples about his identity, and this week's text continues the discourse and acquaints us with the implications of Jesus' mission as the Messiah — a mission that involves suffering and death.

Bold Peter who, just six verses back, declared Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16) now rebukes his Master's words about Jesus' impending death. And Jesus' harsh response to Peter, “Get away from me, Satan!” is a sharp reminder of the evil one's ongoing seductive tactics that are in opposition to God's will. Just as Jesus resisted Satan's temptations in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11), here again, Jesus will not be deterred from accomplishing God's purpose. He will not take the easy way out; rather, he chooses to set out for Jerusalem and take the path that leads to suffering.

To be sure, what Jesus tells the disciples is not what they want to hear. Yet, the blueprint for discipleship that he now describes involves total commitment. To share in the glory of God's Kingdom involves suffering for the sake of the Gospel. To take up the cross and follow Jesus is to set aside self interests and live in a way that is pleasing to God.

The apostle Paul admonishes us to offer ourselves “as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him” (Romans 12:1b, *GNT*). In this week's text from Romans (12:9-21), Paul outlines the marks of discipleship and the implications of a life dedicated to serving God. He assures us of God's promise that evil will not defeat us and exhorts us to conquer evil with good (12:21).

In speaking of his suffering and death, Jesus also states that he “will be raised to life” (Matthew 16:21b, *GNT*). The path of suffering and death leads to resurrection; the path of discipleship leads to salvation. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel we read Jesus' instructions to “go in through the narrow gate, because the gate to hell is wide and the road that leads to it is easy ... but the gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard” (7:13,14, *GNT*).

Jesus calls us to place our trust in him and follow where he will lead. We may stumble and fall, but he will continue to walk beside us, lovingly lifting us up. He bore the heavy weight of the cross and paid the price for our sins so that we would inherit the gift of salvation. He promises never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5) and invites us into the presence of God with these words:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father!
Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you
ever since the creation of the world.”
(Matthew 25:34, *GNT*)

Yes, the path of discipleship is hard; but the way of the cross is the path that leads to eternal life. Jesus puts forth the choice to each of us today. Which path will you choose?

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Sri Lanka – With thanks to God for last year’s launch of the New Revised Sinhala Bible and for outreach to the elderly, and with prayers for this year’s outreach efforts to professional people, and with prayers for God’s help in using the Scriptures to promote peace and reconciliation in the face of escalating violence in the country; **Maldives** – With prayers for God’s protection and encouragement in the midst of difficult circumstances, and with prayers that the Scriptures be made available to all those desire them, despite the restrictions on organized Bible work; **India** – With thanks to God that, despite various challenges, Bible work is spreading far and wide in the country, and with prayers for many ongoing translation projects, work with special audiences, and the development of audiovisual projects such as the Radio Bible project, and with prayers for Bible work in Bhutan; **Pakistan** – With thanks to God for answered prayers and that cooperation with the Catholic Bible Commission has borne fruit and has led to the publication of 14 Urdu Comics and 16 Portions about men and women of the Bible, and with prayers for God’s blessings and the completion of the computerized Urdu Bible and for work on the Urdu Study Bible.

Activity Corner: “Discipleship” Cross

Supplies needed: Bible; construction paper; cross pattern (8-1/2” x 11”); scissors; pens/pencils.

Read together Matthew 16:24-26 and Romans 12:9-21. Discuss what it means to follow Jesus and carry one’s own cross. Using construction paper, trace and cut out a cross. Write the word DISCIPLESHIP vertically down the center, keeping the first “S” by the crossbeam. On either side of the letter “S” write JESUS, “J E” to the left of the “S” and “U S” to the right. On the reverse side of the cross, write down what you will do to show your commitment as a follower and disciple of Jesus. Conclude by reading Psalm 26 as a closing prayer.