

My Brothers and Sisters,

As we saw from last Sunday's readings, the readings during Ordinary Time often have multiple themes. This is even more true for today's readings than for last Sunday's readings.

In today's second reading, St. James explains the relationship between faith and works. However, to understand this reading, we have to understand the meaning of Christian faith. We find that meaning in today's Gospel. In today's Gospel, Jesus asked his disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*" After they told him who others thought he was, he asked them the critical question, "*But who do you say that I am?*" In other words, "Who am I to you? What do I mean in your life?"

This is also the critical question Jesus asks us. Jesus asks each of us to make an act of personal faith in him. Both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have stressed the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus. In today's Gospel, Peter responds, "*You are the Christ.*" However, in Matthew's Gospel, Peter gives a more complete answer: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" [Mt. 16:16]. Christian faith is, first, faith in the person of Jesus, the Son of God. Christian faith is also faith in who this Jesus is for us. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior.

It quickly became clear, however, that Peter was not able or not willing to accept the whole message of Jesus about himself, namely, his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. During the course of the Old Testament, God's promise of the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior had become ever more clear, culminating in the four songs of the Suffering Servant of God. Today's first reading is the third song of the Suffering Servant. Jesus understood himself to be that servant.

The final verses of the Gospel challenge our understanding of what it means to believe in Jesus, i.e., what it means to become a disciple of Jesus: "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*" In my opinion, many Christians distort the meaning of this verse by looking for crosses to carry. No one needs to look for crosses to carry. Life presents all of us with enough crosses. I would suggest that taking up our cross and following Jesus means humbly and patiently accepting and dealing with all the challenges that life throws at us.

St. James tells us that "*faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*" In other words, faith must be lived. As Catholic Christians, I would suggest that the works of faith include Sunday Eucharist, daily prayer, and the observance of the commandments. However, the example St. James gives suggests that the primary works of faith are works of charity toward others. St. James is completely consistent with what St. John wrote in his First Letter: "*And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us*" [3:23].

My brothers and sisters, today's readings challenge us to believe in Jesus as Son of God and Savior. However, they also challenge us to live that faith especially by loving one another, especially the poor and the marginalized.