

Here are some additional signs that don't read quite right.

Outside a secondhand shop: We exchange anything – bicycles, washing machines, etc. Why not bring your spouse along and get a wonderful bargain?

Spotted in a safari park: ELEPHANTS, PLEASE STAY IN YOUR CAR. (Let's hope so!)

Notice in a farmer's field: The Farmer allows walkers to cross the field for free; but the bull charges.

And my favorite: On a repair shop door: We can repair anything. Please knock hard on the door – the bell doesn't work.

OK, down to business. First, a little background on this foundational text, often

referred to as the Confession of Peter, because Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Now up to this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' mission and ministry has had the theme of bread with Eucharistic overtones. We were led into the multiple weeks on John 6 by MARK'S account of the feeding of the 5000. We even have a contrast between Herod's birthday celebration which became a banquet of death for John the Baptist, contrasted with Jesus' banquets of healing and life (Mk 6:14ff). Then, in less than 2 chapters, bread is mentioned 17 times. For example, Jesus multiplies bread for the Jewish crowds in Mk 6:35; He has an encounter with the Syrophenician woman in which they discuss bread being thrown to the dogs (Mk 7:24); then Jesus multiplies bread for the GENTILE crowds (Mk: 8) Ultimately, the bread signifies the passion and glory of the Son of Man, who will give His life for us as spiritual food.

Now Caesarea Philippi is a dramatic place, built at the base of a towering cliff at the southern base of Mt. Hermon. A spring flows out of a cave and forms one of the sources of the Jordan River. This site was a big focus of pagan worship. The great cliff and the stream were thought to be the entrance to the nether world (the Gates of Hell as it states in Matthew's account of this confession of Peter). Herod the Great built a marble temple there in honor of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, who was considered a god; Herod's son Philip enlarged and renamed the city after Caesar and himself – Caesarea Philippi. This is the eery and dramatic setting for Jesus' question: "Who do people say that I am?"

Peter's confession of faith thus took place in a region that had been devoted to worship of false gods – gods who had to be appeased, cajoled, feared; gods who 'consumed' their subjects, sometimes literally in human sacrifice. The disciples would have felt the creeps walking in the area – it was against all of their Jewish sensibilities. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah thus serves as a hinge: The preceding section reveals that Jesus has invited us to a banquet in which He gives us Himself as the Bread of Life. One of the great promises of the prophets was that when the Messiah came, he would establish an everlasting banquet with an abundance of bread and wine.

Peter has seized upon this truth. Popular opinion was that Jesus was perhaps John the Baptist, or Elijah, or a prophet, but not the Messiah. This may seem obvious to us as Christians, but, for Peter, it represented a penetrating insight – and earth-shattering revelation.

But what would this have meant at the time? Some held that the Messiah would be a Davidic warrior-king who would liberate Israel from the Romans. Others envisioned a priestly messiah descended from Aaron.

Some were hoping for 2 Messiahs, a king and a priest. Still others hoped for a superhuman figure who would usher in a new age of peace and prosperity.

But no one was expecting a Messiah like Jesus – a suffering-servant Messiah (cf Is 53 and Dan 9:26). At this point, Peter and the disciples do not yet understand the true reality of what it MEANS for Jesus to be the Messiah, and so He sternly orders them to keep silence on the matter. The whole understanding of Messiah had to be purged of its triumphalism and so Jesus tells them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly, be killed, and be raised on the third day.

Peter, of course, rejects this notion – it makes no sense to him, to which Jesus sternly replies, ‘Get behind me, Satan.’ Satan, in the New Testament refers to the prince of demons; literally in Hebrew it means ‘adversary.’ The adverb translated correctly as ‘behind’ also means ‘after.’ So there is a second meaning here. Peter is acting as an adversary because he is trying to lead, rather than follow Jesus.

This is the meaning of communion with Jesus for those who partake of the bread that He will give – we follow Him. The big mistake that church-goers have made over and over is that we have WORSHIPED Jesus – we come to church – but we often have not FOLLOWED HIM – doing as He did – caring for the poor, forgiving others, including all, loving all. In the very next verse, Jesus says that those who wish to follow Him must “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” This is not simply a question of accepting suffering that happens to befall us, nor is it simply a Stoic resignation. Jesus is telling us to actively take up our crosses, to willingly carry them as Jesus willingly carried His.

Jesus bore others’ burdens in love and this is what we are called to do too, actively seeking out ways to lighten others’ loads. When we cling and grasp, we lose our lives; when we let go in radical love, we find our lives and the innermost meaning of our communion with Jesus, what we are about each Sunday here at the Lord’s table. (all of this taken from Deacon Rich Mickle, notes from Mk 8:27-35) And I want to tell you that all of this background came from Deacon Rich, who was always a master of exegesis or the background to a text; I asked him for these notes after he used them in a daily mass several years ago. I knew I could torture you with them eventually!) Talk about picking up your cross!

Second of only 2 points, but it has 6 sub-points. Don’t go crazy! Just remember something if it hits you, or just continue your nap! I suspect that each of us has a gut-sense of what it means to pick up the cross – and what it will cost us; but, I suspect too, that many of us misunderstand what Jesus is asking here and struggle unhealthily with this invitation. What, concretely, does Jesus mean by this?

To answer this, I am going to lean on some insights offered by James Martin in his book JESUS: A PILGRIMAGE. He suggests that taking up our cross daily and giving up life in order to find deeper life, means 6 interpenetrating things:

First, it means accepting that suffering is a part of our lives. As a friend of mine puts it: “There’s always a night shift – and everyone of us has to take our turn.” Accepting our cross and giving up our lives means that, at some point, we have to make peace with the unalterable fact that life is just plain unfair! That frustration, disappointment, pain, misfortune, illness, sadness, and death are a part of our lives and they must ultimately be accepted WITHOUT BITTERNESS. As long as we nurse the notion that pain in our lives is something we need not accept or don’t deserve, we will habitually find ourselves bitter – bitter for not having accepted the cross.

Second, taking up our cross and giving up our lives means that we may not, in our suffering, pass on any bitterness to those around us. We have a strong inclination, almost as part of our natural instincts, to

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make others suffer when we are suffering: “If I’m unhappy, I will make sure that others around me are unhappy too!” This does not mean that we cannot share our pain with others. But there’s a healthy way of doing this, where our sharing leaves others free, as opposed to an unhealthy kind of sharing that subtly tries to make others unhappy because we are unhappy. There’s a difference between healthily groaning under the weight of our pain and unhealthily whining in self-pity and bitterness under that weight. The cross says it’s ok to groan, it’s not ok to whine. Jesus groaned under the weight of His cross, but no self-pity, whining, or bitterness issued froth from His lips or His beaten body.

Third, walking in the footsteps of Jesus as He carries His cross means that we must accept some other deaths before our physical death, that we are invited to let some parts of ourselves die. When Jesus invites us to die in order to find life, He is not, first of all, talking about physical death. If we live into adulthood, there are a myriad of other deaths that we must undergo before we die physically. Maturity and Christian discipleship are about perennially naming our deaths, claiming our births, mourning our losses, letting go of what’s died, and receiving new spirit for the new life that we are now living. These are the stages of the paschal mystery, and the stages of growing up. There are daily deaths.

Fourth, it means that we must wait for the resurrection, that here in this life all symphonies must remain unfinished. So much of life and discipleship is about waiting – waiting in frustration, inside injustice, inside pain, in longing, battling bitterness – as we wait for something or someone to come and change our situation. We spend about 98% of our lives waiting for fulfillment, in small and big ways. Jesus’ invitation to us to follow Him implies waiting and accepting the truth that we live inside an unfinished symphony.

Fifth, carrying our cross daily means accepting that God’s gift to us is often not what we expect or want. God always answers our prayers but, oftentimes, by giving us what we really need rather than what we think we need. Resurrection does not come when we expect it and rarely fits our notion of how a resurrection should happen. To carry our cross is to be open to surprise.

Finally, taking up the cross and being willing to give our life means living in a faith that believes that nothing is impossible for God. This means accepting that God is greater than our imagination. Indeed, whenever we succumb to the notion that God cannot offer us a way out of our pain into some kind of newness, it’s precisely because we have reduced God down to the size of our own limited imagination. It’s possible to accept our cross, to live in trust, and to not grow bitter inside pain only if we believe in possibilities beyond what we can imagine; namely, if we believe in the resurrection. Amen. (Rolheiser, THE PASSION AND THE CROSS, p. 64-67)