

In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. We should understand that in his world, the Roman Empire, the cross symbolized a heinous form of execution. And although there are layers of theological meaning as to why Jesus died on the cross, at face value, Jesus of Nazareth was affixed to a cross because of what the Jewish and Roman authorities regarded as insurrection and rebellion. Long before what we celebrate in Holy Week, doing his Father's will was making waves and disturbing the powers that be. He knew he was rebelling against society, and for a specific purpose: to help usher in the Kingdom of God.

So in saying to his disciples, "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me*", he was saying that we must also be prepared to rebel against the ways of the of society, but furthermore be prepared to suffer consequences, if we are to do our part in ushering in the Kingdom of God.

While I believe this is the point he intended to convey to his immediate listeners, there are other meanings we can draw from his command to take up our cross, especially as he drops the hint to the future reality, that *the Son of Man must suffer greatly*.

We commonly understand *our cross* as a call to accept the hardships that come with life, to be patient in suffering that inevitably will come, to stay close to God and seek Him in our trials. We say it again and again: Hard times will come our way, and as an abstract notion, we know it.

But I think it's also fair to say that when it becomes more than an abstract notion, when suffering directly impacts us or those we love, suddenly our faith and trust can so easily unravel.

It's a heavy privilege as a priest to often encounter people in their suffering. I recall speaking with someone who was very distraught over her sister's health, who suffered with a serious sickness. She was helping to care for her sister, and understandably exasperated by so much emotional weight, she opened her heart to me, releasing the pain. In expressing her pain, exasperation, and fear, at some point she tearfully asked me, "*Why would your God do this?*"

I believe, it was a rhetorical question. And further, such moments tend not to be teachable moments, to offer theological nuances. I know better, and yet I responded, "*That's the thing about our God. I don't believe He did this to her. And even more, we believe that He Himself was willing to suffer. He knows first-hand the suffering your sister is undergoing.*"

She responded, "*She (her sister) was praying that God would take away the pain*". Again, despite knowing better, I said, "*That's like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, who pleaded in prayer to not face the suffering that awaited him*".

To this, she said, "*I don't care what happened to Jesus! I don't care!*" I sighed within at my futile and foolish responses. I told her that I understand and acknowledged that my answers were likely not satisfying. And yet I still felt compelled to ask her to consider, if only to temper her pain: "*Please know, the God who loves your sister and has not abandoned her—He is loving her through the love and care you are giving her.*"

Suffering is perhaps the most common reason that people cease to believe in God. And yet there are others who manage in the face of suffering, to remain strong in faith, who even seek God as a source of strength in that reality. We've all heard Jesus' message: that the Son of Man himself would suffer greatly and that we too are to take up our cross. *So, why is it that some people come to believe God is uncaring and distant, while others find strength in Him?*

I think the difference may well be this: That it's one thing to hear those words—that *the Son of Man himself would suffer greatly* and that *we too are to take up our cross*—but it's another thing to meditate upon them and to try to delve into their meaning. On the surface, they are just words. We must go deeper, to explore and dig into what Jesus is trying to say to us.

While we don't seek suffering, suffering will come to each of us—it's only a matter of *when, how, and to what degree*. To the extent we can go deeper, to unearth Jesus' meaning, and his call for us to bear his gentle yoke (Mt

11:28-30), it assures us that he will help us to carry *our* cross. But even more, he assures us that such suffering can unite us to him and *his* cross, and that as it led him to something beyond the cross, so it will lead us. In whatever suffering that is our lot, Jesus, his cross and what lies beyond it are our only true cause for hope and strength. And in it we must at least desire to trust.