

One thing that occurred to me as I was reading today's Gospel is that, if it can be very hard to hear bad news, it may even be harder to hear good news. It's hard to hear bad news, but it can be even harder to hear good news.

Reading the Gospel today, I guess we all agree that Peter is in denial. A few verses before, Peter has just acknowledged, in front of all the disciples, Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God. Yet now, once this fact acknowledged, Jesus reveals to his disciples what it is like to be the Messiah, a central theme in Mark's Gospel: The Messiah is a suffering servant. The Son of God will "(...) undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again". Well, it seems that this teaching is unacceptable for Peter. Not only, as we often assume, because he wants his Messiah to be strong and powerful and to establish the kingdom of God on earth. My guess is that after a few years living so closely to Jesus, Peter probably has that down that Jesus is not a warrior, a man of organized rebellion, somebody interested in ruling over the people. For me, it's more likely that Peter does not want Jesus to suffer, he does not want any evil to happen to his friend and he does not want any bad thing to happen at all. Our text says that Peter "rebukes" Jesus but we should understand: Peter is trying to convince Jesus that those bad things he is talking about are not going to happen (This is actually Matthew's version of the episode).

We know of course, that Peter is very wrong. We have the end of the story. And as Jesus announces it, bad things will happen indeed.

Yet, if Peter is wrong, guilty and even a "Satan" for denying the bad things, I guess we are all guilty with him, aren't we? We don't want bad things to happen. Not to us, not to our close ones. Death, rejection, suffering: These are words we just don't want to hear, the summary of all our fears. Death, rejection, suffering: These are the three worst things that can happen to us, aren't they? And if they even happen to the Son of God, then surely they will happen to us and to those we love. Does not Jesus seem to confirm this idea, warning us that, as he took up his cross, we also, will have to take up our cross, and follow him?

Yet most of us, we are like Peter, we don't want to hear about this part, and although we believe in a crucified Lord, we try to avoid thinking about his sufferings and certainly we don't wish to be crucified with him. We may at times feel very religious and pray to God to share some of God's heartbreaks, but I guess most of the time what we ask God is to help us, to comfort us, to bring us some relief. It's human, isn't it?

And yet. Yet, if we sit with this Gospel and try not to be overcome by our anxiety, we may hear the good news in it - the good news Peter fails to hear - because the good news is in it, the real good news, the only good news, the good news that rejection, suffering and death will actually be overcome, because, and this is the heart of Jesus's teaching, after three days, the Messiah, the Son of God, will rise again. And so when Peter clings to optimism: "Bad things won't happen", Jesus actually invites Peter to move to hope: "Bad things happen, so they might be destroyed for ever".

I think we live in a culture that is all about optimism. Some of it may not be harmful and can actually be quite useful in everyday life: Invitation to see the good side of things, to smile to life and life will smile to us, stay positive. Some of our optimism, yet, is much more destructive: we don't want to believe in global warming, or don't believe enough to make some radical changes in our way of living. We still believe that the United States is a wealthy country when 45 millions of Americans are stuck below poverty line, but we don't think there is anything wrong in our economy and we claim that everybody can become president. Well, according to Jesus, refusing to see the bad things is not extended optimism, it's denial and it can be the very work of the devil. The devil leads us to refuse to look at reality as it is, the mess we're in and our incapacity to deal with it. We prefer thinking that evil does not exist at all, or that it is not that significant, because we don't know what to do or we don't want to do anything. Bad things keep on happening but we just look the other way without trying to change our lives and turn to God. Jesus reminds his disciples and reminds us today that evil is a reality - and this is the bad news that along with Peter we don't want to hear: Rejection, suffering and death can't be avoided.

Yet, this is not all what Jesus is saying and it's actually not even the point of his teaching today. The point is that, if we bear with him, listen to him to the end and walk the walk with him to the end, we will see how life can be transformed.

And so this is what happens today: Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him not so much that we may be rejected, suffer and die with him, but that being with us in rejection, suffering and death, Jesus will lead us to real life and Resurrection. I love it that Jesus says: "Pick up your cross". He does not say: " Bear your cross", "Endure your cross". Jesus says look at your pain, your failures, your shortcomings (not only your individual pain but the pain of this world) and go on your way, follow the road with me and I will do something with you. You will enter in a greater life than this. The invitation to deny ourselves does not mean we need to sacrifice ourselves. Denying ourselves mean: Stop trying to do it on your own, thinking you can find an emergency exit. Face reality and pick up your cross. And maybe, maybe, when we finally pick up our cross, we will realize that there is less suffering in facing our lot than in trying to avoid it. Peter's optimism is all fed by his anxiety as is much of the optimism of our society. But fleeing is exhausting and often leads to despair. When we pick up our cross and face reality, we are freed of despair and anxiety. Because we can act on it.

I think the work the families of the victims of the shooting in Florida are doing now is so remarkable, fighting as they do to change the laws. This is a "taking up of the cross" in action. They don't deny their pain and the risk that this tragedy could happen again - but they are ready to do something about it. In the same way, Jesus teaches us that we can look at reality because rejection, suffering and death should not have the last word and won't have the last word. He showed us the way, and we can go beyond our fear and our shame. And Jesus tells us today not to be ashamed.

Jesus frees us from superficial optimism to give us hope. Hope is not based on the belief that bad things don't exist or won't happen. Hope is based on the belief that bad things happen but more important than that, we have the insurance that God is with us and good and mighty to save. Optimism is based on an illusion, hope is based on a promise.

Look at Abraham and Sarah. They can't rely on optimism, you know. I am always amused that the author of the Bible always reminds us that Sarah was barren, when at any rate she is ninety years old - an age where all women are barren anyway, so it's like she is twice barren. And her husband is ninety nine years old, so probably they are three times barren. There is no life in them and at their age they are as good as dead. And, yet they believe. Abraham and Sarah don't fool themselves pretending everything is great, things aren't great, but they believe in God's promise because it's the only thing they can rely on. Their hearts are so open that they trust in God's goodness. Adam and Eve, the young and beautiful, live in a wonderful garden but all they manage to find is a snake because they can't trust God! Abraham and Sarah, the old and the useless, live in the desert and yet all they can see is the stars. "Hoping against all hopes" as Paul mentions in his letter to the Romans, they are able to hear the voice of God in the depth of the wilderness and in the depths of their souls.

In this Lent, may God gives us hearts big enough so we can accept the bad news. The bad news of our world, of human condition, of our sinfulness. The evil we endure, the evil we commit, the evil committed on our behalf. But most of all, may also God give us hearts even bigger so we can also receive the good news and trust it enough we can change our ways and carry on with hope, being a sign of hope in words and action for the all the world to see the promise we have received in Christ's death and mostly in Christ's resurrection. Amen.