

It's important for us to pay attention to details whenever we are reading the Bible, because details can often help us to understand what we're reading and what it means for us today. And one detail like this comes at the beginning of our reading in Matthew chapter 17, where it says: "And after six days." Six days after what? we might ask. Well, six days earlier, in Matthew chapter 16, we see Jesus going up to Caesarea Philippi, about twenty miles north of Capernaum where he typically was. And while he was there, he asked his disciples an important question: "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples give him all kinds of answers. They say: "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." But none of these answers are actually good enough. None of these answers show an understanding of who Jesus actually is. So Jesus asks them the question: "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter, Matthew 16, verse 16, says: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And that is the right answer. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the eternal Son of the living God. This is who Jesus is.

But the disciples don't yet fully understand what that means. They don't fully understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. And so Jesus shows them what it means. He goes on to say, verse 21: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." So the Christ, then, must go to Jerusalem. The Christ must suffer many things. The Christ must be killed. The Christ must rise on the third day. In other words, for Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, means that he must go the way of the cross. To be the Christ means that Jesus has to suffer.

But that's not what the disciples expected. That's not what they thought it meant for him to be the Christ. To them the Christ was supposed to conquer, to stand victorious over his enemies. To them the Christ was supposed to reign in Jerusalem, not to be killed. To them the Christ must conquer. He must kill all of his enemies. To them the Christ must be victorious, but victorious in the way that the world looks at victory. That's what they expected the Christ to be. Certainly not for him to go to the cross! This is why Peter says, verse 22: "Far be it from you, Lord. This shall never happen to you." But Jesus rebukes him for this. Peter and the others are not thinking about Jesus being the Christ in the way of God. They're not setting their minds on the things of God. Rather, they are thinking in the way of the world.

Why is that such a problem? we might ask. Why is it such a problem for Peter to say this? Why does Jesus rebuke him so harshly? Couldn't he just tell him the truth, clear up a few misconceptions, and then everything would be better? Why is it such a serious problem that Peter thinks the way that he does? Because, Christians, what we think about Jesus shapes what we think about ourselves. What we think Jesus does and must do affects what we think we are and must do as well. If Christ in our minds didn't have to suffer, if he didn't have to go the way of the cross, then we will think that we don't have to go the way of the cross either. If we think of Jesus in a worldly way, we're going to think of ourselves in a worldly way too. How we think of Jesus affects how we think about ourselves.

This is why Jesus goes on to say just before our reading, verse 24: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." For Jesus to be the Christ means that he must take up his cross and die at Jerusalem. That is who he is. That is what he has come to do. And if our picture of Christ does not include the cross, then we have the wrong picture. It's as simple as that. But if we are in Christ, if we believe in him, then we also must take up our

cross and follow after him, to suffer with him, to die with him. And if our picture of what it means to be a Christian does not include the cross, then we also have the wrong picture. Jesus shows us this in John chapter 15 when he says: "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours." To be a Christian means that we must suffer together with Christ. We cannot be a Christian without the cross.

And maybe we're willing to accept that. Jesus said it, after all, right? Maybe we are willing to accept that we must suffer together with Christ, that we must go the way of the cross. But we often are willing to accept it when there isn't a cross for us to bear. But as soon as that cross comes, as soon as it costs us something to be a Christian in this life, then it's not quite so easy to accept, is it? Because how often, Christians, do we become impatient when we are suffering? Wondering why do I have to deal with this? Why is this happening to me? How often do we ask or even demand that God take this away from us? I don't want to have to deal with this anymore. How often do we shy away from even a hint of suffering, even the possibility that it might cost us something to be a Christian? How often do we try to soften everything so that it isn't so offensive to the world, so that it isn't quite so hard to hear? How often are we even willing to just give in so that we don't have to suffer at all? So that these things that we're going through will just go away?

When the cross is laid on us, Christians, and it will be laid on us, what we think of Jesus matters. If we think of Jesus as only victorious, if we think of Jesus as only conquering, if we think of Jesus as only glorious, then we will not suffer our cross patiently. We will ask: why do I have to deal with this? Why can't it simply come to an end? Because too often, Christians, we want victory without the cross. Too often we want to conquer without pain. Too often we want glory without suffering. And for that reason, we often misunderstand who Jesus is, just as the disciples did so long ago. And we forget that Jesus had to suffer before he entered into his glory. Jesus is only victorious through the cross. Jesus only is conquering through death. Jesus is only glorious because he suffered at the hands of men. That is what it means for Jesus to be the Christ.

But Jesus shows us in our reading for today what it means for him to be the Christ, that even though he must suffer, he will enter into his glory. So that after six days, he goes up on that high mountain to be transfigured. His face changes so that it shines like the sun. His clothes become dazzling white, whiter than any snow, as white as lightning. Signs that he is, in fact, God. Because John in the book of Revelation, when he sees a picture of Jesus in heaven, describes him like this: "His face was like the sun shining in full strength." And Daniel also who saw a vision of God in glory describes him this way: "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire." So in other words, on that high mountain the disciples are seeing a glimpse of Christ's glory. They are seeing a very small picture of Jesus as God. What a sight that must have been! To see Jesus in that way on that mountain on that day!

But Christians, this has a purpose. Jesus is not showing them his glory just because he felt like it, as if he was bored and had nothing else to do. Jesus shows them his glory to prepare them for what must come after this. Because at the same time that Jesus is transfigured, Moses and Elijah also appear with him. And in the Gospel of Luke chapter 9, we hear this: "And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure,

which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." They come to him, and they talk about his departure, that is, they talk about his suffering and his death which he was about to undergo at Jerusalem. Keep that in mind, Christians. On the day that Jesus shows forth his glory, he talks about his suffering. He talks about his death, because that is what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. Even as he is shining like the sun, even as his clothes are whiter than lightning, whiter than snow could ever possibly be, even as he is showing forth his glory as the Almighty Lord, he shows who he is as the suffering Christ, the one who must die on our behalf.

That is one of the reasons for the Transfiguration, Christians. By showing us his glory, a small taste of what is to come, Jesus prepares us for what must come before he enters into that glory. Because Jesus will go down from this mountain. Jesus will go to Jerusalem. Jesus will go to the cross, and he will suffer and die. There is no getting around it. There is no avoiding it. There is no glory without the cross. And the same is also true for us. Because if we are in Jesus, then we must be like him also in his suffering. There is no glory for us without our own cross. There is no heaven apart from the suffering that we endure in being like Christ. But just as Jesus suffered and entered into glory, Christians, so also will we. Because our suffering will not go on forever. Just like Jesus died and rose again on the third day and entered into glory, so also will we when we are in him. Because the same Lord who carried his cross to Calvary will give us the strength to carry our own today.

Therefore, Christians, do not fear the cross that God lays upon you. Though it may seem heavy, it is preparing you for the glory to come. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." Though the cup that God gives you today may be bitter, it will lead to sweetness. Though the road that God wants you to go on may be hard, it will end in the glorious and golden city of God. Jesus shows us who he is so that we will be ready to suffer together with him. But Jesus also shows us who he is to prepare us for what will be ours in him. If he suffered, we will also suffer. But if he is glorified, then we will enter into that same glory in him.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has called us to take up our cross and to follow You, strengthen us to walk the way You have gone. Show us Your glory so that we may gladly suffer all things, knowing that we will be glorified in You forever; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.