

“We would like to see Jesus.” We hear these words spoken by some Greeks in today’s Gospel. They’re big fans of Jesus. Who would blame them for wanting to meet him? They had heard great things about Him. They heard about how He raised people from the dead. They heard about how He cured demoniacs and healed lepers and paralytics. They heard about how He even fed a multitude of people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. And now, He was getting close to Jerusalem. Surely, their long awaited Messiah had finally come and they were going to be part of His victory parade into Jerusalem to overthrow the Romans. They expected Jesus to tell them about how great life was about to become.

But instead, in typical Jesus fashion, they got a response they didn’t expect. Jesus tells them that they’re not going to be part of a victory parade. They’re going to be part of a funeral march. They learn that following Jesus is not all about miracles and large crowds. They learn that there is a vast difference between being a fan of Jesus and being a follower of Jesus. If they’re going to follow Him, they must be prepared for something far from easy. If they really want to follow Him, it’s not going to involve an encounter with a spectacular Messiah. They will have to embrace the Suffering Servant - the scarred face, the broken humanity of God in the flesh.

All of this makes me think about those drug commercials you see on television. It doesn’t matter which one. They’re all basically the same. You know the ones I’m talking about. They come on and show people doing ridiculous things like sitting in bathtubs in the middle of a field or doing yoga by a lake or throwing a Frisbee for a dog on a beach - nothing remotely related to the drug they’re advertising. Then, they ask if you have heartburn, for example, and tell you how this new miracle drug will eliminate heartburn forever if you just take this one tiny pill every day for the rest of your life. The kicker is at the end of the commercial when a voice comes on and says “Side effects may include.” Then, the voice goes through a laundry list of possible side

effects that are usually worse than the heartburn itself - like may cause blindness, or bleeding from places you're not supposed to bleed from, or your right foot falling off. But, hey, at least your heartburn will be gone.

I think in some ways following Jesus is like those drug commercials. Humor me for a minute and imagine if there was a Jesus pill. I bet a commercial for it would go something like this. The commercial starts with scenes of streets paved with gold, mansions on a hilltop, cherubs and angels flying around, and, of course, people throwing a Frisbee for a dog on a beach. Then, they ask if you want the gift of eternal life and tell you that to receive it you just have to take this Jesus pill every day. Not just every day but all day every day. Then, at the end of the commercial, that familiar voice comes on and starts with the "Side effects may include" spiel. The litany of possible side effects this time includes alienation of friends and family, pain and suffering, rejection, dying to self, a deflated ego, humility, and, in severe cases, even physical death. But, hey, you'll have eternal life.

The invitation to being more than just a fan of Jesus is our prescription for salvation. It applies when things are going well and when things aren't going so well, when it's convenient and when it's inconvenient, when it's popular and when it's unpopular. Jesus wants us to make a total commitment to Him and follow Him. The problem is, in today's culture, the Jesus pill is hard to swallow.

And it's hard to swallow because it requires things of us that are counter-cultural and, quite frankly, hard to do. Moving past being a fan of Jesus into being a follower of Jesus is the hardest thing we'll ever do. It's harder than giving up meat or soft drinks or caffeine this Lent. It requires us to accept suffering. It requires us to detach ourselves from our possessions - to not let our possessions be the center of our universe.

Following Jesus involves a death to the things we hold most dear, perhaps to life itself. It's a strange paradox that life itself comes through death. Jesus gives us the example of the wheat grain in the Gospel. We hear, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Think also about the acorn that must be cracked open in order to become a mighty oak tree; or the cocoon that must be split open in order for the beautiful butterfly to emerge; or the candle whose flaming wick must melt the wax in order that light and heat may happen. Embracing this vision – that death is a transition that leads to higher and greater existence - is essential to following Jesus.

He isn't asking too much of us. Jesus doesn't ask anything of us that He Himself wasn't willing to do. He can relate to what we face on a daily basis because He faced it too during His life here on earth. He shares in our humanity. He felt alienation of friends and family. He felt pain and suffering. He felt rejection. He carried His cross to Calvary for us and died for us. Every time we come to Mass we're reminded of His total sacrifice for us. All we have to do is gaze upon the crucifix.

Through His death comes our hope for new life. This is the Paschal Mystery, the miraculous movement through death to life – the path Jesus follows in his death and resurrection - through death to life; through defeat to victory; through suffering on the cross to the glory of Easter.

If we transform our lives from being just fans of Jesus into being followers of Jesus, we become the people we're meant to be. We become a people that are detached from self-love and self-will. We become a people that let go of our own desires, wants, and agenda. We become a people with meaning and purpose in our lives. We become a people fixated on the things of eternity.

Following Jesus demands change, risk, and dying to what our culture tells us what we should be. But if we're willing to risk loving and allowing ourselves to be loved, Jesus promises us an abundant harvest. If we are willing to nurture healing and forgiveness, we will see a difference in our marriages, in our relationships with our kids, and in our relationships with each other. Following Jesus brings openness to God's grace and the compassion. And the good news is that it's never too late to become a follower of Jesus. There will always be possibilities for new beginnings and second chances. Only by loving is love returned; only by reaching out beyond ourselves do we learn and grow; only by giving to others do we receive; only by dying do we rise to new life.

Jesus never said it would be easy to follow Him, but He did say that it would be worth it. So, as we journey towards Holy Week and experience the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have to ask ourselves, "Are we content with just being fans of Jesus or are we willing to risk everything and be followers of Jesus?"