

RECEIVE THE WORD

And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ... When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. Matthew 13:4, 19

It is safe to say that every person here has at some point been misunderstood. Maybe you gave directions in such a way that the person using them ended up 15 miles from their destination. You're sure your directions were accurate. Now the other person is sure you can't tell north from south. Or maybe you've been criticized for saying something that was rude or thoughtless, and you can't believe someone would have taken it that way, but they did, and they're angry or disappointed in you. It's not easy being misunderstood.

Sometimes there is a willful misunderstanding when we choose simply not to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. At other times, though, we misunderstand someone because what they say is so new or so challenging that we just don't get it.

In Lent, as we follow our Lord through his Passion, it is amazing to see the role that misunderstanding plays as he moves toward his cross. All along the way of his ministry he is misunderstood. The scribes and Pharisees do all they can to trip him up and misinterpret his teachings. The people, Jesus says, lack the understanding to grasp his parables. They misunderstand Jesus as miracle-working Bread King able to feed people by the thousands and lead them into a new Golden Age of prosperity.

But in the Passion story especially we see how Jesus' own disciples run away, leaving him to suffer alone. Mark says at the end of the arrest scene in Gethsemane, "They all left him and fled" (Mk 14:50). And as you read the four Gospels' story of his ministry, repeatedly we're told that his disciples did not understand him. "They did not understand him," we're told, when he predicted three times that he would go to Jerusalem and there suffer, die and rise from the dead (Mk 9:32). When he used the figure of a shepherd to describe his

relationship with them, we're told, "This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them" (Jn 10:6).

On Palm Sunday, John tells us: "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him" (Jn 12:16). When Jesus is about to wash Simon Peter's feet in the upper room, Jesus says to Peter, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand" (Jn 13:7).

Jesus was misunderstood all right. And the fact that his disciples deserted him when he needed them can be credited to the inescapable fact that they never really "got" Jesus. They misunderstood him and his mission. They were, in their misunderstanding, fulfilling the parable Jesus told of seed falling on the path and being devoured by birds. As Jesus put it, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path."

It changed, though, for the disciples. After Jesus' atoning work, they finally understood him. "Afterward you will understand," he had said. At supper with the disciples from Emmaus, Luke tells us, "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Lk 24:45).

For us and for others across the world who open their Bibles to learn the secrets of the kingdom, understanding comes best when we know and trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. At times we may question his wisdom or justice. In our losses and pain, we may misunderstand his love and power. We may wonder if all his promises are true. Yet when we consider what he has done for us – his suffering in our place, his death and resurrection – we trust Him again. In that trust, given us by grace, we have the power to look the devil in the eye and say, "You may not take this Word from me. It is mine. I understand it, and it is true." Amen.

Philip Tesch
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North Highlands, California