SERMON:

In the Gospel lesson for last week, Jesus asked his disciples, **"Who do men say that I am?"** (16:13). The disciples said that some of the people thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, the great contemporary prophet. Others thought that Jesus might be Elijah or Jeremiah come back to life.

But then Jesus asked, **"But who do YOU say that I am?"** (16:15). Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16).

Jesus commended Peter for his answer and said that it had come from God.

Then he said:

**"I tell you that you are Peter."**

**"And on this rock, I will build my church,**

**and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it"** (16:18).

Then, practically in his next breath, Jesus told his disciples that he was going to die - that the great religious men of the nation were going to **kill him.**

Stop and think about that! **Jesus was the Messiah**. He had just let his disciples know that. And then he said that he must die.

That might not seem crazy to us, because we know the rest of the story.

We know about the cross, but we also know about the resurrection. We know about Good Friday, but we also know about Easter.

But it sounded crazy to Peter. Peter didn't know what to make of this crazy announcement by Jesus - that he was the **Messiah,** but that he **must die**. Was He just having a bad day?

He had recently been engaged in controversy with the powerful Pharisees. Did it suddenly occur to him that they might try to kill him? Was he afraid?

Peter didn't know what was going on.

But that didn't mean that Peter didn't have anything to say.

One thing you could always depend on - Peter always had an opinion, and he seldom kept his opinion to himself.

So Peter took Jesus aside, and with his voice kept low so the other disciples wouldn't hear, Peter said, "God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you." But Jesus responded,

**"Get behind me, Satan!**

**You are a stumbling block to me,**

**for you are not setting your mind on the things of God,**

**but on the things of men"** (16:23).

What’s happening! Peter, who was a ROCK only a few verses ago, is now a STUMBLING BLOCK.

And then Jesus said this. And this affects us. These are words that Jesus intended to be heard by his disciples at that time –

and through all time.

These words outline what Jesus expects of us - tell us how Jesus wants us to live. Listen to what Jesus says:

**"If anyone desires to come after me,**

**let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.**

**For whoever desires to SAVE his life will LOSE it,**

**and whoever will LOSE his life for my sake will FIND it.**

**For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world,**

**and forfeits his life?**

**Or what will a man give in exchange for his life?"**

So what does Jesus require of us? Do we really need to die for Jesus?

For most of us, the answer will be no –

but we shouldn't dismiss the possibility.

Many Christians, beginning with several of the apostles –

have been faced with denying Jesus or being killed.

Many Christians have died at the hands of their persecutors. That wasn't just true in the first century.

It's also true in the **twenty-first** century.

Christians are being persecuted and killed today in many places because of their faith.

Christians in this country face opposition

that expands every year.

 Many Christians have served Christ in dangerous places - missionaries in primitive lands come to mind - and urban missionaries serving in the inner cities - and chaplains serving on battlefields.

ELISABETH ELLIOT was one of those missionaries. She and her husband, JIM, were serving in Ecuador, when Jim and four other men tried to contact members of the Auca tribe. Unbeknownst to them, tribal members were observing them from the jungle.

They attacked the missionaries suddenly and viciously,

 killing all five men.

Elisabeth continued her service in Ecuador, and wrote a book, *Beyond the Gates of Splendour*, in which she told the story of her husband and the other five men. The book has been made into a film by the same name.

In a particularly moving scene, Frank Drown, a missionary pilot, says that the five missionaries had guns, but had vowed not to use them against the Aucas.

They explained,

**"They're not ready for heaven, and we are."**

 What a testimony to their faith!

At the 100th anniversary of the arrival of missionaries, Christians gathered to celebrate from that part of Zaire that was once called the Belgian Congo. The festivities lasted all day with music, preaching, food and conversations.

Many reminisced about the early days and praised God for the progress of the gospel and the church.

Near the end of the long program, a very old man stood to give a speech. He said that he soon would die and that he needed to tell something that no one else knew. If he didn’t tell, his secret would go with him to his grave.

He explained that when the first white missionaries came, his people didn’t know whether to believe their message or not. So they devised a plan to poison the missionaries, slowly and secretly and watch them die.

One by one, children and adults became ill, died and were buried.

It was when his people saw how these missionaries died that they decided to believe their message.

The missionaries never knew what was happening. They didn’t know they were being poisoned, and they didn’t know why they were dying.

They didn’t know they were martyrs. They stayed and died because they trusted Jesus.

And it was the way they died that taught others how to live.

When Jesus talked about his disciples losing their lives on his behalf, he knew that some disciples would, indeed, be martyred for their faith. But he also knew that some would not.

Jesus requires self-denial, but self-denial will mean one thing to one person and another thing to another person.

But in every case, Christian self-denial will involve some sort of personal sacrifice. In every case, it will involve some sort of service in Christ's name.

For JAMES CALVERT, self-denial meant being a missionary to the Fiji Islands in a time when that was dangerous. The captain of the ship that took Calvert to those islands tried to dissuade Calvert from going - telling him that leaving the ship would mean certain death. Calvert responded,

 **"We died before we came here."**

For a CHRISTIAN SURGEON who was a member of a Church in Hollywood, self-denial meant giving up his practice to go to Korea to set up practice as a medical missionary.

Sometime after the surgeon had moved to Korea, his pastor went to Korea to visit him. He watched as his friend operated on an eight-year-old child. The operation took three hours, and that was just one of the surgeries that the doctor would perform that day.

After the surgery was completed and the child was stabilized, the doctor and pastor got together for a few minutes to talk and relax.

The pastor asked, "How much would you have received for that operation at home?" The doctor answered, "Oh, $500 to $750 is the going rate, I guess." That was many years ago, so we are talking about thousands of dollars in today's currency.

So Evans said, "How much for this one." The doctor said, "Oh, a few cents - **a few cents and the smile of God."**

And then the doctor put his hand on Louis Evan's shoulder and said, **"But man, this is living!"**

Jesus said:

**"For whoever desires to SAVE his life will LOSE it,**

**and whoever will LOSE his life for my sake will FIND it"**

Put it this way. If we are living for ourselves - if we are focused on what we can get out of life – our lives may be hollow and unhappy.

But if we are living for Jesus and for others - if there is a "giving" dimension - a "service" dimension - to our lives - then Jesus will help us to find more satisfaction and happiness than we ever thought possible.

Listen to this poem. I can't tell you the author's name, but we can see what he was trying to say. He said:

**"I counted POUNDS while God counted CROSSES.**

**I counted GAINS while He counted LOSSES.**

**I counted my worth by the things GAINED in store,**

**But He sized me up by the SCARS that I bore.**

**"I coveted HONOURS and sought for degrees.**

**He wept as He counted the HOURS ON MY KNEES.**

**And I never knew 'til one day at a grave**

**How vain are the things that we spend life to save."**

But we can change all that. All we need to do is to spend a little more time centred on God and neighbour –

and a little more time on our knees –

and a little less time centred on self.

Perhaps it's as simple as that.

Perhaps if we will lose our life for Jesus' sake,

at the end of the day we will be able to say,

**"But man, this is living!"**