

Readings

Is 50:5-9a

Ps 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

Jas 2:14-18

Mk 8:27-35

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If someone speaks of the influence of “Madison Avenue,” we all know what is meant: the power of advertising to shape our perceptions of who we are and what we need. We are aware that political campaigns devote huge budgets to producing commercials that various groups of voters will find appealing. Companies that sell toothpaste and cars and potato chips try to place their products in movies and on television shows. Billboards line the highways, posters cover telephone polls, bus benches list local services, pop-up ads and email spam plague the internet, and countries work hard to attract tourists. Many gas stations play commercials on their pumps. For those of us familiar with the Jersey shore, even pleasant summer afternoons are fair game, as planes pull banners through the sky advertising surf ‘n’ turf specials and where to find South Jersey’s best margaritas.

Behind that avalanche of advertising, there lies a Mount Everest of money, research, and testing, as companies seek the right words and the best pictures to make the greatest impact, to push past everyone else’s advertisements, to reach and persuade their target audience. The use of sexually provocative pictures and plots, the digital manipulation of images, the careful selection of humor and music, the composition of memorable catchphrases, even the speed with which images succeed each other – all of this is the result of massive amounts of sophisticated investigation and monitoring done by advertising companies with just one goal in mind: Find

what works. That's the bottom line. If I sell carpet, I want commercials that will increase my sales. If I make movies, I want movie previews and talk shows and websites to sell more tickets. Whether it's politicians or potato chips, advertising is about what sells products, places, and people to the public. Advertising is about what works.

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Now there's a slogan that is sure to bomb. “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.” That message will not have people rushing to sign up to be disciples. No commercials with these sound bites will run on Fox or NBC.

If Jesus were in advertising, Madison Avenue experts would judge his approach to be a dud. Today's Gospel is especially clear about this, but it's a trend that you can find throughout Jesus' life. His first spokesman is John the Baptist, a wild-man dressed in camel's hair, eating bugs and honey, yelling about sin and repentance and the coming judgment. Where are the perfect teeth, the groomed hair, the tailor-made suits and slick pitch – all the things you look for in a spokesman? Jesus himself isn't much better. All his talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, his constant harping about turning away from sin, and now, today, his talk of rejection and crosses and death. Any half-decent focus group would never sanction Jesus' advertising campaign. “Why can't you focus on the rewards of exclusive membership rather than the cost of complete discipleship? And what is this business about being seen with lepers, tax collectors, and people possessed by demons? What demographic are you going for with all of this?”

But as always, Jesus thinks as God thinks, not as we do. Christ is the truth, and the truth sets us free, and one of the first things it frees us from is false advertising. Despite many laws and

regulations which try to promote truth in advertising, we know the buyer still has to beware. We have to pay attention to what the commercials don't say and don't show. We have to bear in mind that the pictures in magazines are cropped and airbrushed so that the subjects scarcely resemble real people. And you need to look through binoculars and speed read if you are going to get through all the business about "license, tags, delivery fees and APR financing" that comes at the end of car commercials.

Not so with Jesus. There is no fine print. He is not selling anything. He is completely unconcerned with his approval rating. He does no test marketing, employs no image consultants, solicits no feedback from the apostles about how things went in the last town they visited, and where there might be room for improvement. There is no happy spin, but there is also no false advertising. If you don't like being told that you're a sinner, too bad. Jesus doesn't change his preaching and begin to go easy on those who commit adultery, who ignore the poor, who abuse their power, who take his Father's name in vain. If you are miffed that he spends so much time eating with the wrong type of people, he doesn't promise to open up room in his schedule to come to visit you. He says that he's the doctor, you should expect to find him with the sick, and if you to meet him, he expects to find *you* with the sick.

God did not become man to pander to our ideas of beauty and ugliness, right and wrong, fair and unfair, power and weakness. Christ offers no quick fix, no instant cure, no fast track to happiness. He is very direct: Being a disciple means suffering and sacrifice. Being a disciple means spending time with people who aren't healthy and fun to be with, but who are brokenhearted because of divorce, grief-stricken because of death, weak because of sickness, riddled by loneliness and bowed down by addiction. Jesus is perfectly frank: "I am the Christ. I

am going to suffer, be rejected, and die. And if you follow me, you will suffer and be rejected, too. And you will have to die to yourself.”

What is it like, to die to yourself? Your home won't be picture perfect, your lawn won't be exquisitely manicured, your car and computer won't be the latest models, your clothes won't come off the runways in Paris and Milan. You will be concerned with other things. And part of you will die: the part that sees the fun and the beauty and the glitz served up by the image makers, and wants to have a share in that. The part that cares more about what your neighbors think than what God does. The part more concerned with making a splash than accepting living water from Christ. The part that craves revenge and shuns sacrifice. The part that sees unhappiness or boredom or anger as an excuse to break wedding vows.

But that part of us is a tumor, and it has to come out. Jesus tells us that when we accept him and let him slowly extract our greed, lust, envy, we will learn a different joy, infinitely more true than what the world rejoices in. Jesus says, Follow me, and I will give you rest: rest from all the noise, all the sales pitches, all the lies, all the phoniness. I will show you what really matters in this short life and this passing world. I will free you from death, dry your eyes, and steady your feet. I will give you what you cannot buy, what is not for sale, and what you can hardly imagine: life, true life, beginning here, and lasting into the world to come.

It is certainly not the perfect sales pitch. But it is Good News.