Our Lord asks his Apostles: “Who do people say that I am?” and He gets several different answers: John the Baptist ... Many people ... including Herod Antipas ... probably out of guilt ... believed and even feared that Jesus was John ... returned from the dead. Others thought that He might be Elijah ... whom they believe had not really died ... and whose return was to herald the coming in triumph of the Messiah ... who would then throw down the yoke of the Roman oppressor and free the Jews. Still others believed He might be one of the other prophets ... such as Jeremiah, whom they believed had hidden the Ark of the Covenant and would come back and restore it to its rightful place in the temple.

Jesus listens patiently and then asks of those who know Him best: “But who do you say that I am?” Peter ... the spokesman ... nails it! “You are the Christ.” But then ... Jesus goes on to warn them not to tell anyone! Why? Peter is right ... as far as he goes. Jesus is the Christ ... the Messiah ... the anointed one! Why not spread the word? ... Jesus did not want this fact known because the people had a very erroneous notion of what being the Messiah meant and His mission ... did not involve fulfilling their expectations ... their expectations of earthly glory ... of His becoming the new David to slay the Roman Goliath! He was not ready to reveal ... nor were the people ready to hear all the all the implications ... of His being the Christ.

Even as He began to reveal to those closest to Him ... what it truly meant ... that He was not a David ... but the suffering servant of Isaiah ... that He must suffer ... that He must be rejected ... that He must ultimately be killed ... even they ... rebelled against the idea. Peter was even presumptuous enough to rebuke His Lord ... exasperating Jesus ... prompting the command: “Get behind me Satan” ... pretty strong stuff!

He had to get their attention because ... as hard as it was to hear what was going to happen to Him ... as if that wasn’t enough ... He had much more to tell them: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it ... “. He is telling them that not only being ... the Messiah involves suffering ... but even following the Messiah involves suffering.
And ... He’s not just telling them ... He’s also telling us that we too ... if we wish to follow Him ... must take up our cross.

Oh ... we certainly don’t have to go looking for crosses! Plenty of them are provided by this thing called ... life! There are crosses of family life, crosses of loss, crosses of loneliness, betrayal, poverty, illness, abuse, disappointment and many, many others. Being a Christian means carrying all these crosses that life lays on us with the forbearance of Isaiah’s suffering servant and the faith that Christ will help us as Simon of Cyrene would help Him. And although it might seem like these crosses would be enough of a burden for anybody ... even more is asked of those who would follow Jesus.

He is telling us that we must not just believe in Him ... not just accept what He teaches with our minds ... but that we must also deny ourselves! St. James elaborates asking: what good is faith without works? Such faith he says, bluntly, is dead! If we truly believe that God is love, then we must bring this love to others, to walk the same path of service, suffering and self-giving love that Jesus walked. This is not an easy path but it, too, is a cross that Jesus’ followers must carry.

And finally ... in our world today ... more and more ... faith itself ... is a cross that the Christian must carry! C.S. Lewis wrote that ... prior to writing the Chronicles of Narnia ... he was quite comfortable ... in his atheism. He didn't want God to exist. He tried to escape belief in God. But after years of friendship ... and patient, gentle, loving evangelism ... by Christian friends ... most notably J.R.R. Tolkien of middle earth fame... the moment finally arrived. He would describe himself ... kneeling in his room ... as "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." And Lewis knew he could not just be a “closet” Christian! That was not who he was! He had to go to church ... to “fly one’s flag”, as it were ... as an Oxford professor ... surrounded by unbelievers ... this was not easy! But he took up his cross!

And if we ...think “not as God does, but as human beings do ...” as the world does ... none of this will ever make any sense! But Jesus says more! After His rejection ... His betrayal ... His suffering ... after His death ... He would rise! And He makes the same promise to His faithful followers ... to us ... for suffering will be conquered by joy, death will be conquered by life and crucifixion ... will be conquered by resurrection.