

## A sermon about Forgiveness and Stuff

Today, the gospel continues straight on from the great declaration of faith when, in the heart of the pagan countryside, Peter blurts out the great truth, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God.” This is a climactic moment in Jesus’ ministry. The disciples, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, were actually beginning to get it. But only beginning. For as soon as Peter has announced who Jesus really is - he makes it clear that he has hardly ‘got’ it at all.

Jesus’ teaching of the disciples really has to speed up as there is little time left. Having declared His person, Jesus now declared His work; for the two had to go together. He would go to Jerusalem, suffer and die, and be raised from the dead. This was His first clear statement of His death, though He had hinted at this before. “And Mark tells us that “He was stating the matter plainly” No parables for the disciples now. You can almost hear the urgency as he starts to talk about his coming suffering. Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Jesus was a fine Old Testament scholar. He knew, and his close daily contact with his father in prayer, had led him to understand where the Messiah project was going. Remember when, after the resurrection he gave a teaching seminar to two disciples on the road to Emmaus - he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! **Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?**” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Jesus knew all this before he went up to Jerusalem, and he tried to explain the purpose of his mission to the twelve. This is the first of three formal announcements by Jesus of what is to come (*cf.* 17:22–23; 20:17–19); from now on the mission became a march to death, and the disciples had to learn to live with this new and frankly appalling

perspective.

It was, however, too much for Peter, whose triumphant declaration in v 16 probably carried the hope of sharing in the Messiah's glory. Dear old Peter, who had only just proclaimed him as Messiah, immediately began to show how little he really understood. Like other Jews at the time, he would have understood the Messiah's work in primarily earthly and political terms; perhaps a conqueror, a driver out of the Romans. Someone who would bring back the worth and esteem that Israel had been held in at the time of his ancestor David. Something like that. But for the Messiah, now that they really knew who Jesus was, defeat and death (and still worse rejection by Israel's official leadership) surely could not be on his agenda.

And as long as the disciples shared this purely human perspective, Jesus' mission could never make sense to them. This is why Jesus' reaction in verse 23 is so remarkably fierce. Already the foundation rock had become a stumbling-block!

Peter took Jesus to one side, and there is a sense in the Greek that he pulled him to one side with an arm protectively around him. Peter's comment "Come off it Lord, this must never happen to you!" was meant well. He wanted to save his dear friend from hardship and death. Peter probably said what the other disciples were thinking. Can you imagine how stunned they all must have been?

Jesus rounded on him - almost fiercely: "Get behind Me, adversary! You are a stumbling block to Me!" (literal translation) Peter the "stone" who had just been blessed became Peter the stumbling block who was not a blessing to Jesus at all!

When Peter rebuked Him for even considering the idea of going to His death, the Lord must have looked the disciple straight in the eye as **He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan."** It was a stinging, devastating response that must have shaken Peter to the core of his being. Before Peter had a chance to finish his objections, Jesus

abruptly cut him off and accused him of being the mouthpiece for His adversary, **Satan**. As one commentator has observed, Peter “could hardly have understood that by his attempt to dissuade Jesus from the cross he was placing arrows in the bow of Satan to be shot at his beloved Saviour.”

Jesus had spoken almost the same words to Satan himself after the temptations in the wilderness. And although Satan left, he departed from Him until an ‘opportune time’. I am sure that he continued to tempt Jesus throughout His ministry in every way he could. Now he put into Peter’s mind the same idea He had tried to put into Jesus’: “God’s plan is too difficult and demanding. Give Your allegiance to me and your life will be immeasurably better. My way is so much better than God’s.”

That is basically what Peter was saying to Jesus: “My way is better than Yours and the Father’s.” The same apostle who had just confessed Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God now contradicted Him. The one whom the Father had just inspired to give that confession was now “inspired” by Satan.

But we must note this: Jesus’ command to Satan when he was in the wilderness was simply: “Begone!” But his command to Peter is: “Begone *behind me!*” that is to say, “Become my follower again.” In this joint command, Satan is banished from the presence of Christ but Peter is recalled to be Christ’s follower. The one thing that Satan could never become is a follower of Christ; Satan had to be first - that is the whole point. He set himself above God.

On the other hand, Peter could make a mistake and might fall and might actually sin. But he always had the chance to become a follower again. It is as if Jesus said to Peter: “At the moment you have spoken as Satan would. But that is not the real Peter speaking. You can redeem yourself. Come behind me, and be my follower again, and even yet, all will be well.”

Do we suddenly see a flash of Peter’s denial of even having met Jesus,

and then his restoration after the resurrection. “Do you love me? Feed my lambs”. The possibility of restoration, redemption, salvation - use whatever long word you wish. Peter could come back home - like the prodigal son.

If you wonder why this particular exchange between Jesus and Peter is recorded, I suspect it is because it is profitable for our instruction. If such a thing could happen to Peter, it can happen to any of us. The same Christian who one day preaches the plan of God can be lured into standing up for the plan of Satan, possibly for the best motives. When we follow our own wisdom instead of the Spirit's, the same one who so strongly took the side of God can find themselves unwittingly taking the side of the world, and the adversary to the plan of the Almighty.

The sudden fall from being blessed by Jesus for what he had said, to the shock of being called ‘Satan’ by the same Lord and Master must have been so discouraging. But Jesus says to Peter and to you and to me: “Get behind me. Become my follower again - no matter what it costs. I will lead you and I promise you eternal life”. In another incident, Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “**Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times (one commentator has said "seven to the power" of seventy).**

A number far too big to keep count of - If Jesus expects us to forgive others, how much more will he forgive us when we get it wrong.

And Jesus followed this up by talking about the disciples themselves having to suffer for the gospel. ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’.

It is arguable whether Jesus was talking about being forced to carry his own physical and literal cross down the Via Dolorosa to Calvary, or whether he was simply using an illustration to shock the disciples further. My own view is that this is the latter.

It was a common sight to see the Roman soldiers driving a condemned man in front of them, dragging his cross. The point was that it was totally abhorrent to any Jew to think of being crucified. 'Cursed be anyone who is hanged on a gibbet', says the Old Testament. This was a death reserved for pagans, for rebels, and for some other crimes like murder - forbidden by the Torah - the law. Jesus himself knew what crucifixion meant all too well. When he was a lad of about eleven years of age, Judas the Galilean had led a rebellion against Rome. He had raided the royal armoury at Sepphoris, which was only four miles from Nazareth. The Roman reply was quick and deadly. Sepphoris was burned to the ground; its people were sold into slavery even though they probably had nothing to do with it at all; and two thousand of the rebels were crucified on crosses set in lines along the roadside like so many telegraph poles, as a warning to others tempted to rebel.

To take up our cross means to be prepared to face things like that for loyalty to Jesus; it means to be ready to endure the worst that man can do to us for the sake of being true to him.