

## Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

We are at a critical point in the life of Jesus. Last week we heard Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Immediately following that statement which marks the end of his public teaching ministry in Matthew's gospel, Jesus embarks on a period of private tuition, starting with the revelation that he is going to be put to death, resulting in Peter's understandable outburst and the famous "Get thee behind me Satan" statement. What was going on?

The fact is that although Peter and the others had understood that Jesus was the Messiah, they still hadn't understood what the Messiah actually was. To them it meant something completely different from what it meant to Jesus. With the benefit of our hindsight, we know how the whole story would turn out and so fail to realise just how shocking Jesus' announcement of his impending death was to those closest to him. The apostles were thinking in terms of the Messiah being a conquering hero; a warrior king who would sweep the Romans from Palestine and ultimately lead them to power. With ideas like these, the disciples would have started a rebellion if they had broadcast them to the public at large.

Before they were allowed to preach that Jesus was the Messiah, they had to first of all find out what that actually meant. And we can see how far removed their notion of the Messiah was from the actual truth surrounding the Messiah when we hear of Peter's reaction.

And so Jesus began to open their eyes to the fact that, for him, there was no way other than the way of the cross. Jesus explained to them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. These three groups of men comprised the whole of the Sanhedrin - the ruling body of the Jewish faith. Jesus was saying that he must suffer at the hands of the orthodox religious leaders of the country.

And it was this startling revelation that infuriated Peter so much. Hot-headed Peter who preferred to act first and think later instantly turned on Jesus denying him this course of action. Peter had been brought up, remember, on the idea of a Messiah of power and glory

and conquest. To him, the idea of a suffering Messiah, a sacrificial lamb, the connection of the cross with the work of the Messiah was unbelievable. Although the prophecies in what we now call the Old Testament clearly point to this eventual conclusion, the very notion that the Messiah would conquer by dying in the most reprehensible of ways was completely alien to Peter - as it was to the rest of the disciples. But it was Peter who took Jesus to one side and tried to stop him from this suicidal route.

“Get behind me Satan!” The rebuke almost makes us catch our breath, so strongly does it come from the lips of the one who had, mere moments ago, praised Peter and declared him to be the rock upon which the Church would be built. But what we miss is the way in which Jesus said it and what the words actually mean. Jesus certainly didn’t say the words with a snarl of anger in his voice but like a man who had been wounded in the heart. It was said with poignant grief and a kind of shuddering horror.

And the reason for his reaction is painfully clear. At that moment, he was faced once again with the temptations that he had faced in the wilderness at the very start of his ministry. If you recall, he had been tempted to take the way of power in three guises. “Give them bread, give them material things and they will follow you” the tempter had said. “Give them sensations, give them wonders and they will follow you”. And finally “Compromise with the world, reduce your standards and they will follow you”. It was precisely the same temptations that were being offered to Jesus now, only this time coming from the misguided lips of Peter.

And those temptations were never far from the mind of Jesus. If you recall in Luke’s Gospel, we are furnished with the details of the temptation in the wilderness which Luke concludes with the words “the devil left him until an opportune time”. This was such a time. No one really wants a cross. No one wants to die in agony. The tempter was offering a way out, as he would do so once more in the garden of Gethsemane. The tempter was trying to lure Christ into taking another way rather than the correct one which he should take.

Peter was offering another way. Peter was offering Jesus the same things which the tempter was continually offering Jesus. And that is why Peter was called Satan by Our Lord. Satan literally means “the Adversary” and at this precise moment, Peter was Jesus’ adversary because his ideas were not God’s ideas but man’s. Satan is any force which seeks to deflect us from the way of God. Satan is any force which tries to turn us back from the path that God has set before us.

But here, the temptation was made even more acute because it came from someone who loved Jesus. Peter uttered the words he did because he loved Jesus so much and couldn’t bear to think of the path that lay before him. The hardest temptation comes from that of protecting love. There can be times when love can deflect us from the path God has for us. It can be possible for love to be so protecting that it seeks to protect us from the adventure that is fighting for Christ. It is a love that tries to protect us from the difficulty of the pathway that the Christian life leads us on.

Jesus understood that, and the hurt that he felt was due to the tempter using the words of love to tempt him from his path. The difference is that Peter would get behind Jesus and follow him - that was something Satan would never do. And we can take comfort in that truth that so long as we are prepared to follow Jesus, even after we have fallen from the true path, there is still for us the hope of glory here and everafter.