

Matthew 16:21-28**Deny Yourself**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week in the Gospel reading Peter makes one of the clearest confessions of faith in Jesus in all of scripture, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." In today's Gospel reading, Jesus rebukes Peter as Satan. In just a few short verses Peter has gone from superstar apostle to the enemy of the kingdom of God. Not that he had literally become the devil, but what he suggested to Jesus was the same temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness. Trying to thwart the Father's plan for Jesus life is what Satan was up to after Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan. And Jesus is telling Peter right now in very straightforward language that he was doing the same thing. Peter, therefore, is no longer acting like the foundation block of the church but like a 'stumbling block'.

We see this sort of dramatic change repeatedly in Peter's life as a disciple of Jesus. One moment he gets it, he knows who Jesus is, and in the next, he is denying him and his purpose in either words or deeds. And when we look at the story of the early church, and the history of Christians throughout the ages, and indeed to our own experiences in life, this is a commonly repeated pattern. As disciples of Jesus, we don't always shine with the light of Christ in all that we do. We have moments of good and pious devotion, but also moments of disobeying God, and not living as we should.

In one sense, Peter has a very good excuse for his lack of following Jesus properly. He would have been raised with the hope of the Messiah that was promised by God. He had confessed that Jesus was that Messiah, but not one who would willingly suffer and die. This was not the hope and expectation of Israel. Peter was on a roller coaster ride which seemed to be headed for disaster. He was a Jew and could not fathom a Messiah who would give up his life just at the moment when he should be seizing the leadership of Israel. Jesus had included a strong word of hope when he said that on the third day he would be raised. But Peter doesn't seem to grasp the significance of that, and can't let Jesus go ahead with his plans.

The problem, according to Jesus, is that Peter was setting his mind not on divine things but on human things. His expectation of the Messiah was a very human expectation. And this is our problem too. Not that we are expecting a different Messiah because the Messiah has already come, but that our starting point, our default position, is a limited human perspective. One that so easily puts our wants and supposed needs before anything else.

This is a consequence of the human fall into sin. We are all born with a self-centred and self-serving nature that does not understand the will of God. It is only by the grace of God that we are given the eyes of faith and can see what God would have us see.

The trap in this passage is that we just turn Jesus into the example of things to do. When Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me", we take that as a challenge to try and pay him back for the price he paid. We might say, "If Jesus was willing to die on the cross for you, then shouldn't you be willing to serve him in return?" But this is actually still thinking about things from a human point of view. Jesus was to die, not simply as an example of godly behaviour for us to follow, but so he could rise again and reveal the incomprehensible power of God to change the world. To follow him, then, means to be part of that changed world, part of God's new creation. And this is both the challenge and the good news in this text.

If we follow Jesus, we Christians will be seriously called to bear certain crosses and lose hold of our lifestyle, if not our life. Yet, in all our weakness and human mindedness, it is Jesus' own death on the cross that enables us to do what we ourselves cannot. We are led by the Spirit to the unselfconscious love and care for those in need. Crosses that we need to bear will come our way. Luther once said that anyone who has a spouse or a family already has enough built-in crosses to bear.

But we do also gladly take up other burdens. We especially do those things that aren't glamorous or exciting. We service on church committees, attending countless meetings. We give more than we think is financially prudent and hope it doesn't put a dent in our lifestyle. We help out those people who annoy us, thinking we are sacrificing a great deal.

The list of little crosses is endless. But to take up the cross is to deny oneself. Not just some part of yourself, or those things that make up your life. Rather, you, yourself in your entirety, need to be put to death and become nothing and hold onto nothing in which you might place your confidence before God. This does not happen unless you deny what is best in you, even your own good deeds, your own righteousness and wisdom. Instead, you live in the righteousness and wisdom of Christ alone.

This doesn't mean we count ourselves as worthless, or even seek out crosses to bear because we deserve nothing but punishment. As Jesus' disciples who understand what it means to be made in the image of God, we should have a better self-image than any other people, but it should be based on God's grace and not our righteous, or self-righteous, efforts.

To deny yourself simply means putting God and his kingdom first. To take up your cross is to willingly bear the hatred of the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh, just for the sake of the faith we confess. There's no need to go out and find this cross. There will always be someone who is a neighbour in need. Always that call to sacrificial living beyond ourselves, where we live for the sake of others. And it's much like what Jesus says in the parable of the last judgment, where those who are gathered before the master and commended for their unconscious serving of the needs of others, are told, "As you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me." Such hidden service is rewarded with an invitation to 'enter the kingdom' which has been prepared for them.

When we put the things of God first, we naturally serve the least of these, naturally bear the burdens of those in need. But, like Peter, we all too easily focus on earthly things, and not the things of God. We convince ourselves that we know better, and in doing so we reject those in need, reject the cross we are called to bear. But, also like Peter, God graciously restores us, rebukes the self-centred thoughts, and call us back to himself. Because of the cross that Jesus bore, our sins are forgiven. And this all happens as many times as it needs to. We saw it in Peter's life, and you'll see it in your own life too. God is constantly calling you back to him, constantly calling you to check your thoughts and attitudes against his own, that you may indeed set your minds on heavenly things, not earthly things.

So may you be filled with the Spirit of God who will lead you into this life of trusting in Christ alone, of living in his righteousness and his wisdom. May you know the truth of God's will and God's ways. May you gladly bear the burdens of others, living not for yourself, but for those in need. And may you rejoice in the forgiveness of Christ for all those times that you reject God's will and God's ways, and are restored by him.

To God alone be the glory, both now and for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.