

## DEATH AND LIFE

### Matthew 16: 21-28

A few weeks ago we were in holy week, the final week of Jesus's ministry before his crucifixion and glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. This morning's reading takes us back in time before Holy Week to Caesarea Philippi just after Peter's famous confession of Jesus as the Christ the Son of God, to the time that Jesus announced that his time had come, started teaching his disciples plainly about this and as Luke says resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem. So, as we look at Jesus's teaching to his disciples together, please open your Bibles at page 984 so that we can study this together.

Jesus starts by neatly summarising what his being the Messiah means, he makes it plain to them what kind of Messiah Peter has confessed - look at verse 21:

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21 NIV)

The form of wording used here emphasises that this was an important new revelation to the disciples – although Jesus had previously given hints of what was going to happen to him, this is the first time that he has made it completely clear. The reference to the elders, chief priests and scribes or teachers of the law, the three groups who together made up the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, makes it clear that this will be an official execution. But, this kind of a Messiah was going to be very difficult for people, even the disciples who had been so close to Jesus, to understand – look at Peter's immediate reaction in verse 22:

"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"" (Matthew 16:22 NIV) and I'm sure Peter's statement was the view of the other disciples as well. Here the Greek word used for rebuke is the same as that used elsewhere for Jesus's stern commands to the wind and waves when he calms a storm and to a demon when he commands it to come out – so

we can see the intensity of Peter's shock and his boldness in expressing it. He doesn't see Jesus's words as a mission statement, but as a disaster to be prevented. The strong word Peter uses for "never" indicates that he sees this as completely unthinkable. But, Jesus firmly rejects this denial of the nature of his Messiahship – see verse 23:

"Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:23 NIV)

Jesus's counter rebuke of Peter is also severe. Imagine the effect of the body language. Whereas Peter had confidentially "taken Jesus aside," Jesus now "turns on him" to issue a public reprimand, calling him directly and personally the "enemy" or "Satan". This must have been especially wounding for Peter coming so soon after Jesus's accolade of him for recognizing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. So even Peter, even after this special understanding of the nature of Jesus, has completely failed to understand what Jesus was saying. Jesus has clearly stated the nature of his mission, but the contrast in verse 23 between "God's thoughts" and "human thoughts" neatly summarises the problem. The same Peter who had spoken what God had revealed to him is now beguiled into speaking Satan's words. The rock which was to be one of the foundations of the church is being a rock to stumble over. The resurrection on the third day which Jesus had clearly announced in verse 21 is completely overwhelmed for the disciples by the death and defeat which preceded it. No wonder Jesus had told the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Not only would this have provoked the authorities too soon, but the disciples would have got the message wrong. Interestingly in verse 21 Jesus says that he will "be raised" rather than that he will "rise" encouraging us to see this as the Father's vindication, his upholding, of his faithful Son.

The notion of Messiahship involving the suffering and death of the Messiah was clearly going to be very difficult to get across if even the leading disciples couldn't grasp it. Unfortunately that still continues to be the case today; the cross is a barrier, a stumbling block, to many,

often because they see Jesus's sacrificial death as primitive and irrelevant.

But Jesus says that he "must" go and that he "must" be killed. This is really saying that the crucifixion was necessary for the fulfilment of the divine plan. Later in his gospel Matthew makes the necessity clear. In chapter 20 verse 28 we are told that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many and in chapter 26 and verse 28 Jesus says that his blood is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Isaiah had predicted this hundreds of years before in Isaiah chapter 53. Without Jesus's death and resurrection there would have been no forgiveness of our sins and no Christianity. Do you realise the importance of this. Without Jesus's death and resurrection there would have been no forgiveness of our sins and no Christianity.

Jesus now abandons his rebuke of Peter to continue instructing the disciples and the teaching turns from Jesus's mission to what it means to be his disciple, look at verses 24-26:

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26 NIV)

The first part of verse 24 really echoes what Jesus had already taught the disciples as recorded by Matthew in chapter 10 verses 38-39 and it's interesting that Jesus told the disciples they would have to take up a cross before it is made explicit that this is the way Jesus would die. If discipleship means identification with Jesus then the disciples must expect to share his fate – and so must we today. The "must deny himself" echoes the "must be killed" of verse 21, this is not an optional extra for the Christian life, it is imperative.

I think our modern use of the phrases "self denial" and "cross bearing" have blunted the force of Jesus's words. Jesus was speaking about literal death – following a condemned man on his way to execution. Discipleship is a life of at least potential martyrdom – ask

the Christians in the Middle East, or parts of Africa or China. I think we can infer from Jesus's words to the necessity for a complete denial of self, to ideas of putting loyalty to him before our own comfort, but the primary meaning is literal and not metaphorical. The "cross" and the "loosing life" of which Jesus speaks are literal; most of the disciples whom he was addressing eventually met violent deaths. Such a demand can only be made and only makes sense in terms of Jesus's offer of eternal life to his disciples and indeed to us in verse 25 – but we should never forget that Jesus did and does make this demand of us. Even if we are not called to physical death we certainly are called to the acceptance of a sentence of death on all personal ambition and goals. This is a hard teaching. For Peter this meant saying no to being a fisherman and yes to being a fisher of men; it meant saying no to the dream of a military Messiah and yes to a crucified Messiah. This is indeed a very hard teaching. Christianity is not a soft or cost free option, yet the alternative is to preserve the physical self and loose the true self. We are called to share in Jesus's suffering, but that gives us the promise of a share in his triumph as we follow him into eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

The idea of gaining the world in verse 26 parallels one of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness as he began his public ministry. The attainment of material possessions, even the wealth of the entire world, will be useless if we forfeit our true selves and eternal life. Let's not forget that all this took place at Caesarea Philippi where an image of Caesar was set up to be worshipped. Shall we choose to worship Caesar and this world or will we choose to follow Christ. Football has been defined as 50,000 people who desperately need exercise sitting in a stadium watching 22 men running on the field who desperately need rest. Let's not be spectators in the Christian life, but active participants. A real true faith should lead us into self sacrificial works for our Lord and his kingdom.

The hint of judgement in verse 26 in terms of "forfeit" is now made clear, look at verse 27:

“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” (Matthew 16:27 NIV)

The judge is to be the Son of Man himself, that same Jesus for whom the disciples have been called to give up their lives. It’s a judgment which takes place in a heavenly scene, where the same Son of Man who is to die in Jerusalem will now be justified and vindicated and enthroned in glory. The earthly threat of suffering and death is thus put into perspective: Jesus himself will rise above it, and his disciples too must expect to be judged (and where appropriate rewarded) in a more solemn and ultimate court than any earthly tribunal. It is in that context rather than in earthly self-preservation that true life is to be found.

Jesus’ words from our reading today thus close on a very different note from where they began. The prediction of his coming rejection and death still stands, but over against and beyond it his disciples are to set the vision of his ultimate vindication and glory, as judge and king in the presence of his Father and the angels. There are strong echoes of Daniel’s vision from chapter 7 of the book of Daniel where the son of man also comes in glory.

A specific time limit is predicted, look at verse 28:

“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:28 NIV)

Jesus had already given other time linked predictions, for example that recorded in Matthew 10 verse 23 where he says that this “coming” will be before the disciples have gone through all the towns of Israel; or in Matthew chapter 24 where Jesus says it will be before the present generation is over; here it will be before some of them die. In this verse 28 Jesus is not referring to the second coming, as he was in verse 27, rather he is speaking of his vindication and glorification at and following the resurrection. Eleven of the disciples, all apart from Judas Iscariot, did indeed see that “coming”, they encountered the resurrected Jesus now endowed with “all authority in heaven and on earth”.

But that will be only the beginning of an extended period during which the newly established sovereignty of the Son of Man will be increasingly visible. The “seeing” of v. 28 which was soon to come is not the whole of the long term application of the fulfillment of verse 27. Verse 28 speaks of a more specific focus for the general and timeless authority expressed in v. 27. The point is that while some of the disciples are still alive it will have become clear to those with the eyes to see it that Jesus the Son of Man is enthroned as king.

In addition, it seems that in verse 28 Jesus was also referring to the transfiguration on a high mountain which as we learn in Matthew chapter 17 was to happen in just six days time and was to be witnessed by just three of the disciples. The time linking of the two events which is very unusual in the gospels must surely indicate a deliberate attempt to emphasise the close connection between these events.

So what have we learned this morning? We see that Jesus knew full well that he was called to suffering and death in Jerusalem; it was the divine plan for him. Any deviation from this path would have been a surrender to Satan. As Christians, as Jesus’s disciples, we are called to lay down our goals, our ambitions, our material possessions, all that is of ourselves, even our lives, as we take up our cross and follow in the master’s footsteps. Of course we can and usually do come to faith without good works and without sacrifice – we are saved by grace and not by works – but it is into good works and sacrifice that a true saving faith should be leading us. In doing so, we lose our own selfish lives, but, find true eternal life with Christ and gain a share of all the blessings and benefits of the kingdom of heaven. If we don’t do that, then we forfeit the rewards that Jesus promises the faithful, when he comes again in judgement. Christians are called to make huge sacrifices, but will gain unimaginable blessings and benefits

Let’s close with a few words of prayer. Father in your mercy and through the power of your Spirit, give us the power and strength to deny ourselves, to turn away from ourselves and turn to your Son, to

take up our cross and follow him that we may also follow him into the benefits of eternal life with the Father and gain the rewards in your kingdom which are promised to his faithful disciples. Amen.