

The cross: where God reveals himself

Matthew 16:21-28

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."

INTRO

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? That is the subject of the Gospel reading of today, and we will spend some time to think about this issue. It is clear from what we read, that certainly our apostle, saint Peter, was totally clueless about the Gospel of Jesus

Christ and about its implications for following Jesus – and this is worrying. Jesus began to show what the Gospel entailed, but the students of Jesus did not get the point at all.

Is it possible to be with Jesus, to hear from Jesus, to see Jesus, and still be clueless about the Message of God for us today? Is it possible to go to Church for years, and still not comprehend the essence of the Gospel of our Lord?

The situation our own Anglican communion, especially in the western world, is in, underlines that the answer to the question is yes, sadly, yes, it is possible.

If this is possible, we must pray that our Holy God will open our eyes, ears and heart for His Word!

PRAYER

1. DEATH AND RESSURECTION OF CHRIST FOR OUR SALVATION

For us who believe in the Biblical testimony, there can be no doubt about the heart of the Gospel.

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.

Since the earliest days of the church, Christians have confessed, with the Apostles Creed, about Jesus:

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again.

This is the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the deepest expression of the love of God for you and me, and it is the necessary and only basis for the forgiveness of sins that God offers to us. The cross of Christ is where we look God in the eye. That is where He reveals himself.

And Peter? And probably the other disciples as well? They could not understand it.

Actually, for them to not understand it, was not so strange. How can we understand the Gospel? Comprehension of this painful and loving deed of the Lord Jesus Christ is beyond us.

But Peter went much further than not understanding. He rejected the very words of Jesus. If we do not understand, that is one thing, but for us to reject the words of Jesus, then we are on very dangerous ground.

Matthew, one of the disciples who was there and who wrote the account that we have read, says:

Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

What a strong language! Peter rebuked Jesus. How dare he!

But on the other hand, it was not so strange. What Jesus had just announced, that he would 'undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed', stood diametrically opposed to the worldview of Peter and his friends.

So Peter sets the theological facts straight for Jesus.
"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Peter had been brought up with the idea that the Messiah, the Christ who God would send, would be one of power, glory and conquest. The idea of a suffering Messiah was simply inconceivable. Unthinkable!

Just hours before, Peter had confessed that he believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. And upon that confession, Jesus had said:

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of hades [the underworld] will never overpower it.

Now that was language that Peter liked, language of victory and power, not language of suffering. It is not fully strange that Peter, hours later, believed that he has to make Jesus understand that all this talk of weakness, suffering, death, did not become the Messiah.

A very natural approach of Peter, a very human approach. If someone is God's chosen person, a prophet, the Messiah, the Son of God, how in the world is it conceivable that God would ever allow such good person to suffer and be killed?

Islam has exactly the same approach. You can read this in the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, called *al-Nisaa'* (the women):

In response to the Jewish bragging: 'Surely we killed Christ Jesus, son of Mary, the apostle of God', the Qur'an then says:

but they killed him not and they crucified him not. (*Wa maa qataluuhu wa maa salabuuhu*)

They killed him not and they crucified him not, but, says the Qur'an, 'a resemblance of Him was presented to them.' God did

send someone who looked like Jesus and he was crucified and buried instead of Jesus, is what Islam teaches.

Islamic teachers have from the inception of Islam underlined that it is inconceivable that God would allow his servant, the prophet Jesus, to suffer. So when the Jews wanted to kill him, they actually crucified someone who looked like him. But Jesus himself was not killed; He was taken up, directly into heaven.

Ghulam Sarwar writes in an Islamic catechism called *Islam; beliefs and teachings* (The Muslim Educational Trust (London, 1984), p. 158:

According to the Qur'an, prophet [Jesus] was not crucified to death rather he was taken up by Allah...

This is 'natural theology', human, logical thinking, this is the story as we would have written it. But it is not the storyline of God.

So Jesus rebukes Peter sharply – it is the devil teaching you. Satan tries to deflect all of us from the ways of God.

Peter offered Jesus a way of escape from what God wanted Him to do, an escape from the suffering and death that was part of the plan of God.

Peter's idea, and the concepts of Islam, deny our only chance of salvation through the God-given Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification.

I believe that the denial that Jesus actually died, or should die, is related to the concept that God will not allow his servants to suffer. That teaching is untrue, a lie, and a dangerous one. It promises the good and easy life to those who are good servants of the Lord, and this is a lie.

I quote from Surah Yunus from the Qur'an:

Behold! the friends of Allah shall certainly have no fear nor shall they grieve -
Those who believe and were ever righteous -
For them are glad tidings in the present life and also in the Hereafter

For friends of Allah there is no fear or grief in this life, only glad tidings; this is what the Qur'an teaches. It sounds nice, but in reality it is a sad message.

Because turn it around: if you fear, if you have grief, if you suffer, if you have problems, it is because you are not a good servant of God, and this is exactly the idea that we do often hear in the Arab World.

This concept is destructive for you and I, and for all people, because the reality is: most of us have lives full of problems. Full of them.

Does this mean that God is far from you, punishing you because you are not a good Christian? No ofcourse.

2. FOLLOWING JESUS IS COSTLY

I think Peter understood very well, that if He had to follow a Lord who would be persecuted, killed, and buried, that this would also impact his own life. I think that is exactly why Jesus immediately explained that following Him, is very costly.

There is not other way. Following Jesus is the answer to God's free offer of salvation – but following him is very costly.

We have to pay a price, a high price, if we want to follow Jesus. He saves us by grace, and grace alone, but if we then follow his example to serve God, we must also deny ourselves, take up our cross, and lose our own life.

This is the lifestyle of the Christian, but this is not language that every Christian likes or that every Christian lives by.

I often see Christian TV programs that prefer the life of glamour and success, health and wealth, over a Biblical lifestyle. Forgive me for giving you some quotes. This particular person, Benny Hinn, says:

Years ago they used to preach, 'O, we are going to walk on streets of gold.' I would say, 'I don't need the gold up there. I've got to have it down here'. (Benny Hinn, Praise-a-Thon, TBN, 2nd April 1991).

There will be no sickness for the saint of God. (Benny Hinn, *Rise and Be Healed!*, 1991, p. 14); He promises to heal all- every one, any, any whatsoever, everything- all our diseases! That means not even a headache, sinus problem, not even a toothache- nothing! No sickness should come your way. (ibid., p. 32);

God's greatest desire for the church of Jesus Christ... is that we be in total and perfect health. (ibid., p. 65); If your body belongs to God, it does not and cannot belong to sickness. (ibid., p. 62)

What a shame that in the Church this is being preached. Preachers of this sort should know better.

Let me quote to you some wisdom by church father Saint Cyril of Alexandria – he became bishop in Alexandria in the year 412. He says about this lack of understanding of the disciples of Jesus:

Since the disciples had not yet received power from on high, it was perhaps not unnatural that they should sometimes fall in human weaknesses and, thinking something of this sort: 'how shall someone deny himself? Or how can someone by losing his life, gain it'?

That the disciples had difficulties to understand this, before Jesus died and rose again and before they received the Holy Spirit is not strange. But if we do not understand this, it is very strange, because we have his Word, and we have received the Holy Spirit of God and the teaching of the church of 20 centuries.

It is not possible to be a Christian and to follow Christ Jesus, without also suffering with Him, denying ourselves, losing our lives.

William Hendriksen, a Reformed theologian, gave a good description of what it means to deny yourself in his book *New Testament Commentary on Mathew*, Grand Rapids 1973, p. 656:

A person who denies himself, gives up all reliance on whatever he is by nature, and depends for salvation on God alone. He no longer seeks to promote his own predominantly selfish interests but has become wrapped up in the cause of promoting the glory of God in his own and in every life, and also in every sphere of endeavor.

Being related to the One who was rejected by mankind and who suffered, can only lead to us also experiencing the same rejection and suffering to a certain extent. We must be realistic: Being a Christian gives us great joy, because we are related to our Holy Father in heaven. But it does not mean less problems in life; disciples of Jesus get new problems, related to following Him. And this comes on top of the normal problems of life that we suffer together with all other people.

Jesus had to suffer and die for our sake. And if you have a miserable life, know that Jesus Christ understands you. He suffered the

same miseries, and in the midst of the darkness of your problems, He is with you. If the pit is deep, He is there with you.

Your misery, your problems in work, your family problems, your sickness, nothing of this means that God has left you. The opposite is true. In the midst of your suffering, Christ is present. In the midst of your weakness, God is there.

No wonder so many people in our world want to follow this great Lord who is Immanuel, God with us, even when we are in our lowest spot. Because irrespective of our suffering, and in the midst of our problems, God is with us.

How great then, to deny ourselves, to take up the painful crosses in our own lives, and follow Christ. We follow Jesus in spite of the problems, the poverty, the misery that may be the result of it.

And we are not without hope. The promise of a happy, healthy and wealthy life today may offer a semblance of hope for a short time – but the preachers of that prosperity gospel can never deliver what they promise. Never, because their promise is a lie.

3. ETERNAL GAIN IS OUR HOPE

Our heavenly Father never leaves us, and gives us great hope.

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.

How great to look forward to the time when He will wipe away the tears from our eyes. The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers us real hope.

Saint Chrysostom wrote 1600 years ago, in his commentary on the Gospel of Mathew about the heavenly hope that we Christians have if we suffer persecution, problems, even death in this life:

Why are you afraid, Peter, so [Jesus] speaks, as you hear of death? Then you will see me in the glory of the Father. If I am in glory, so are you all. Your interests are in no way limited to the present life. Another sort of condition will take you up, a better one.

I look forward to meeting our Lord Jesus Christ; but in the meantime, He calls us to follow Him, and use our life for bringing the good news of salvation to all people, whatever it costs.

Shall we follow Him?