

SUFFERING AND GLORY

Sermon prepared by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield, August, 2020
Church of the Good Shepherd , Pine Grove, Bluemont, Virginia
Trinity Episcopal Church, Martinsburg, West Virginia

In the story of today's Gospel from Matthew¹ Jesus predicts his suffering and future glory. He "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."

The Scottish theologian William Barclay whose commentary is being closely followed in this sermon tells us, "Although the disciples had grasped the fact that Jesus was God's Messiah, they still had not grasped what that great fact meant." The general understanding among the Hebrew people was that the Messiah would be a conquering warrior king, who would overthrow the Romans who occupied Palestine and lead Israel to power. The disciples held this popular view of the Messiah as an earthly king who would help them in their secular world.

So Jesus began a process of trying to teach the disciples that for Him there was no way but to go through the suffering that would take him to the Cross to be crucified and die. Jesus mentioned the "elders and chief priests and the scribes, because these three groups of men were in fact the three groups of people that made up the ruling Sanhedrin. The elders were the respected upper class men of the community. The chief priests were predominantly Sadducees, and the scribes were Pharisees. Jesus is telling the disciples that he will be persecuted by the orthodox religious leaders of

¹ *Revised Common Lectionary, Episcopal Edition*: Church Publishing Inc., New York, NY 2007
Proper 17, Yr. A : Matthew 16:21-28 page 180

their own country Israel.²

As soon as Jesus said that to the disciples, Peter who has been brought up with the notion of a powerful Messiah cannot conceive of the idea of a suffering weak person as the Messiah who would end up on a cross, the Roman form of execution. Peter reacted with anger, grabs Jesus and says to him, “God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you.”³ Jesus then turned to Peter and said, “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.”⁴ This statement by Jesus is what Professor Barclay calls, “The Great Rebuke.” It startles us when we hear it- “Get behind me Satan!”⁵ How do we understand this exclamation by Jesus? What is going on here? We should not imagine Jesus is speaking with a snarl of anger in his voice and a blaze of indignant passion in His eyes. He said it like a person wounded to the heart, with poignant grief, with a kind of shuddering horror. Why would Jesus react that way?

Jesus reacted like that because in that moment there came back to Him with cruel force, the temptations which He had faced in the wilderness, at the very beginning of His ministry. Jesus had been tempted by Satan to take the path of power. “Give them bread, give them material things,” said the tempter, “and they will be yours.” “Give them sensations,”

² Barclay, William: *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2: The Great Rebuke*; Chapter 16:20-23 Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1958 pages 162-163

³ Opp.cit.: *Episcopal Lectionary...Matthew:16:22* pg. 18

⁴ Ibid. *Episcopal Lectionary...Matthew: 16:23* pg.

⁵ Opp. Cit. Barclay: Matthew 16:23 pg. 18

said the tempter, give them wonders- all the kingdoms and you will have them.” “Compromise with the world,” said the tempter. “Reduce your standards, meet the world half way, and all will follow you. The early wilderness temptations of Jesus were precisely the same temptations Peter was confronting Jesus with all over again.⁶ Nor were these temptations ever wholly absent from Jesus memory. They are the same temptations that are always with all of us in this modern world. Luke in his Gospel sees right into the heart of Jesus. He describes a whole list of temptations in the wilderness that are the same as confronted our Lord in our lesson from Matthew.⁷ At the end of the temptation story Luke writes: “And when the devil had ended all the temptations, he departed from Him for a season.⁸ Notice! Satan is not gone forever, only a season, he’ll be back! That’s why Jesus taught us to pray, “lead us not into temptation,” in the Lord’s prayer.

William Barclay in his Commentary continues: “Again and again the tempter had launched his attack. No one wants a cross; no one wants to die in agony; even in the Garden of Gethsemane on his last night before the cross on Good Friday, the same temptation confronted Jesus, the temptation to take another way; and here Peter is offering it to Him now.⁹ The temptation was always being whispered by the tempter in Jesus mind. Peter was urging upon Jesus the very things against which our Lord had to steel Himself ; Peter was offering Jesus a way to escape from the Cross.

⁶ Opp.cit. Barclay, Matthew; page 163-164

⁷ The Holy Bible NRSV; Thomas Nelson Pub., Nashville, TN 1989, Luke 4:1-13 page 81

⁸ Opp.cit. Barclay, Luke 4:13 page 164

⁹ ibid. Barclay, Matthew page 164

That is why Peter was Satan. Satan means literally the *Adversary*. That is why Peter's ideas were not God's but humanity's. Satan is any force that seeks to deflect us from the way of God. Satan is any influence which seeks to make us turn back from the hard way God has set before us. Satan is any power who seeks to make human desires take the place of the divine imperative that confronts us. That which really wounded Jesus' heart, and that which made Him speak as He did speak, was that the tempter spoke to Him through the fond but mistaken love of Peter's empathetic heart.¹⁰

Next comes Jesus great challenge, "Then Jesus said to His disciples: If anyone wishes to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross, and let them follow me. For whoever wishes to keep their life secure, will lose it; and whoever loses their life for my sake, will find it. For what shall a person be profited if he or she gain the whole world at the penalty of the price of their life? Or what will a person give in exchange for their life?"¹¹

Again and again, Jesus confronts people with the challenge to live a Christian life. There are three things which a person must do if they want to live the Christian life.

1) First we must deny ourselves. To deny oneself means we are to make God the ruling principle of every moment of our life. We are to say no to ourselves and yes to God. To deny oneself means we are to ask in every situation, is this what God wants me to do? Is this how God wants me to be.

¹⁰ ibid. Barclay page 165

¹¹ibid. Barclay page 166 Matthew 16:24-26

2)Second we must take up our cross. That means we are to take on the burden of sacrifice. We must be willing to sacrifice our time, leisure, and pleasure in order to serve our fellow human beings in their needs. The Christian life is a sacrificial life of service. Luke adds one word to this command of Jesus, “Let them take up their crosses, “*daily*.” We are to live sacrificially everyday! To put this quite simply, the comfort of the home, the pleasure of a visit to a place of entertainment, a movie, a show, a game, may well have to be sacrificed. It may have to give way to the duties of eldership, the call to participate in a youth group, the visit to the home of some sad or lonely soul. We may have to serve in the military, or on the police force, or in a hospital, in church, or wherever God calls us to go. We may well have to sacrifice certain things we possess or can well afford, in order to give more away. The Christian life is a sacrificial life, taking up one’s cross. The important thing is not only the great moments of sacrifice, but the life lived in the constant hourly awareness of the demands of God and the needs of others more than our concern for ourselves.

3)Third, an individual must follow Jesus Christ. That is to say, we must render to Jesus Christ our perfect obedience. When we were young, we may remember playing a game called “Follow the leader.” In the game we had to do everything the leader did, however difficult, and in the case of the game, no matter how ridiculous, we had to copy what the leader was doing. The Christian life is a constant following of our leader, a constant obedience in thought, word and action for Jesus Christ. The Christian walks in the footsteps of Christ, wherever Christ may lead.¹²

¹² *ibid.* Barclay, Matthew pages 167-168

One note of warning. If its constructive we are following Jesus Christ. If its destructive, harmful, or hateful, it is Satan, the devil, jumping into our life. In questions and situations facing us in life everyday, we need to purposefully ask ourselves, “Is this constructive- for God; or destructive- the devil. If its destructive, that includes immoral, don’t do it! Don’t say it! We can say “No, get thee behind me, Satan.” We can say “Yes” to Jesus Christ, to his love and ministry!

Finally a brief word about losing and finding life, another theme of our Gospel. In life, there is a difference between existing and living. To exist is simply to have lungs breathing, heart beating and blood circulating. To live is to live in a world where everything is worth while, where there is peace in the soul, joy in the heart, and a thrill in every moment. Jesus gives us the directions for life as different from ordinary existence.

1) First the person who plays only for security loses life. Matthew was writing between 80 and 90 A.D.. Those were the days of fearful and terrible persecution. Matthew was saying to a congregation facing a choice of life and death in the Coliseum with the lions: “The time may come when you can save your life by abandoning your faith; but if you do, far from saving life in the real sense of the term you are losing life.” The person who who is faithful may die, but he or she dies to live; the person who abandons their faith for safety and avoids the lions may live, but they live to die. In our day it is not usually a question of martyrdom, but it is a constant fact that while safety is necessary and vital for this everyday worldly life, it may overshadow what is precious and makes life worth while. Life can become a soft and flabby thing for the couch potato, when it might have been an adventure. Life can become selfish, when it might be radiant with service.

Life becomes earthbound, when it might have been for ever reaching for the heavens- the stars. The person who plays only for security ceases to be a person, for man and woman were made in the image of God.

2) Second, the person who risks all- and maybe it looks as if he or she has lost all, however in Christ finds life. It is a simple lesson of history, it has always been the adventurous souls who bade farewell to security are those who wrote their names in history and are remembered for their service to their brothers and sisters. Unless there had been those who took risks, many medical cures would not have been discovered. Unless there were those who took risks, many machines would not have been invented which make life easier and enable us to see and experience vast reaches all over the world. Unless there were mothers who were prepared to take risks, no child would ever have been born. It is the person who is prepared to “bet their life on God” who in the end finds life.¹³

Let us accept our calling, faithfully follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and find the beauty and glory of true life. *Amen*

PROPER 17

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*

¹³ *ibid.* Barclay pages 168-169

FOR THOSE SUFFERING FROM THE CORONOVIRUS

O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your Son's command, all sickness and infirmity that He met was driven away. May your healing mercies be with all those suffering from the Coronovirus now enveloping the people of your world. Comfort and relieve the suffering that weakness and sickness may be banished, strength restored, good health returned and a cure come to your children and servants. Inspire the scientists to find a vaccination that will destroy this evil virus and end its reign. Bless people striving to end this sickness, all those working in the government, the medical and the emergency fields; keep them safe and protect them. Be with all who work in hospitals those comforting the sick, We thank you for your many blessings and mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

FOR THE ELECTION

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States of America in the election of the President and Vice-President, the Senate, the House of Representatives and all officials to be elected; that by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

THE PEACE

The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you and remain with you always. *Amen*

