

The Renewed Perspective of the Cross

Proper 17, Year A, RCL, Track 2. Matthew 16:21-28 (Peter's Rebuke). September 3, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Last Sunday I spoke about the altered perspective that shows us our life according to the pattern of God's nature and purposes. Peter's assent to Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, was a moment of assent to God's perspective on the history, purpose and destiny of creation.

But in today's Gospel reading (which comes right after last week's reading in the Gospel according to Matthew) we hear that Peter (and I daresay the rest of Jesus' followers at that juncture) lacked a critical point of comprehension: they did not realize that Jesus was not going to take up the sword and fix the corrupt social, economic and political system by military force. Rather, Jesus was going to take up the cross and fix the corrupt understanding and will of the human heart by self-sacrifice, invitation and empowerment for good.

When Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" he means three things: get out of my way, fall in behind me, and don't spread misinformation about me. Satan means accuser in Hebrew, and Satan was regarded as the accuser par excellence, but in this context it is more significant that Satan was also regarded as "a liar and the father of lies," as Jesus says in John 8:44. Peter needs to understand what the truth about Jesus is and learn how to articulate it accurately and boldly. And since Peter was being groomed for leadership in the community of faith that we call the Church, and since Peter could be, shall we say, a rock in thickness of head as well as in stalwartness of purpose, Jesus swung a heavy hammer—calling him Satan—to drive the point home.

Now, it's tough to have to round on the person you just declared to be the rock on which your community of faith will be founded. But it was very important that Jesus' core group of followers begin to get a clearer picture of what was coming. It is important that we get a clear picture of it, too. And that is why those sayings about seeking your life and losing it and carrying your particular cross come right after Jesus' stern correction of Peter.

Because, like Jesus, we win when, in the eyes of a world corrupted by appetites, possessions and power, we lose: when we give ourselves away for the love of God and our fellow creatures; when we deny our own desires and satisfactions and comforts—and even safety—for the love of God and his creation; when we bear the pain of the world for the world's sake, be it ever so unappreciative. We look like losers, but we win, because God's nature and purposes are built on infinite generosity, profound renewal, and resurrection to new life.

This is the core of Christian faith and practice, and, though it is adumbrated in other religions and

ethical systems, the Gospel we try (by God's grace) to hear and follow is the most radical of all commitments to a God so generous he will die for love of what he has made, so that his creation can know the truth about how it has been going wrong and rise to new life in him.

That is the core of the renewed perspective that calls us to turn from sin and death and find new life in the love of God. That is the true, good and beautiful comprehension of your life and mine that we are called to explore as a community of faith in Jesus, the Anointed One of God.