



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 1, 2002
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Matthew 16:21-27
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SAINT PETER PART II – THE STUMBLING BLOCK

Peter took [Jesus] and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Last Sunday we heard the first half of Saint Matthew’s narrative of the Confession of Saint Peter at Caesarea Philippi. When, in answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Bar-jona replied that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus blessed him and solemnly nicknamed him Peter, Rock, declaring that his Church was built on the rock of Peter’s confession, a confession inspired not by man but by his Heavenly Father.

But then, as we just heard in the second half of the story, Jesus began to show his disciples that it was necessary that he go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the authorities and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Naturally enough, Peter didn’t want to hear this. He rebuked Jesus, saying, God forbid. This reaction may have been the natural response from a devoted disciple, but unlike Peter’s confession of Jesus’ divine identity, it was not inspired by God. On the contrary, said Jesus, this was from Satan. Peter was not being a Rock but rather a stumbling block.

Jesus’ identity is not simply the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus is the *crucified* Christ. That is not a naturally popular idea, which is why Jesus did not want the disciples to broadcast he was the Christ until after his crucifixion; he wanted God’s, not Satan’s, definition of the Messiah to be preached by his Church. Jesus always saw the necessity of his collision with, and consequent victory over, the sin of the world. The grief of the cross was the price of God’s love for us. The disciples most certainly did not see it. Peter spoke for them all, when he said, God forbid!

Yet both before and after Jesus, the Scriptures speak of this necessary suffering by God’s anointed Servant, his Christ. The great prophet Isaiah wrote hundreds of years before Jesus with such clarity that, on Good Friday when we listen to his words, they seem to be written by someone watching the events of Holy Week. “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried

our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted..." (Is 52:13-53:12)

Likewise, yet just a few years into the Christian Era, Saint Paul wrote, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men..." (I Cor 1:23ff)

It is striking that after Jesus' resurrection, the lesson he stresses over and over in his Easter appearances to the disciples is that *it was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things*. The unbelief of the disciples was not so much that they did not believe Christ's supernatural power; it was their denial that such terrible things, above all such an ignominious death, could happen to the true Christ of God.

When I was a young boy my father took me one Easter to a very realistic church movie about the passion and death of Jesus. It upset me terribly. I remember saying to Dad, "How could they do that to him? All he did was good." That is the natural human response to Christ crucified. It was Peter's response to Jesus' prediction of his passion.

When, after a few years of self-imposed exile from faith, I rediscovered Christ as a college student, it was through the power of Christ crucified, the very thing which Saint Paul calls the foolishness or weakness of God which is wiser and stronger than the natural man. I happened to be studying this very passage of our gospel today. In my mind's eye was Christ's crucifixion, as it had been depicted by the movie that had so upset me as a young boy. Yet this time Jesus' words to Peter came through to me. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." This is the mystery of sacrificial love. When we enter this mystery through the gift of faith, we experience God's love, God's wisdom and power.

Peter denied knowing Jesus at the trial before the high priest. He did it three times, emphasizing his denial with a curse. The cock crowed, as Jesus had predicted, and Jesus turned *and looked at Peter*. Peter went out and wept bitterly.

A few hours before, in the Upper Room, Jesus had made this remarkable prophecy to Peter. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." (Lk 22:31ff)

Christ's prayer for Peter prevailed. Peter's faith revived. Saint John tells us that after his resurrection, Christ asked Peter three times if he loved him, and then enjoined him to feed the sheep and to follow him. (Jn 21:15ff)

We are like Peter. Our immature faith sometimes needs to be broken down in order to grow into Christian maturity. We are called to grow from a simple faith in God with rewards for the good and punishments for the bad (as true as that it is in the ultimate and deepest sense) to faith in Christ Crucified. We are called to this deeper wisdom which flows from embracing the cross.

One of our observances of the anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks will be a Choral Evensong at 5:30 on September 10th for the British community to remember the many British nationals who died at the World Trade center. The service, held in response to a request from the British Government, will conclude with the dedication of an image of Christ Crucified, a 400-year-old primitive Spanish *corpus* which will be attached to the Cross

of Stones from Mount Calvary next to the pulpit here. The Archbishop of Canterbury will be present to dedicate this special memorial.

The corpus is given in memory of the victims of the terrorist attack.¹ I hope this image will assist us in seeing the clear word of Christ Crucified. I also want to have next to our pulpit an image of what should be the intention of every preacher and the expectation of every congregation; namely to convey and to hear the life-giving message of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we fulfill those intentions and expectations as priest and people, we shall be doing very well; we shall be hearing God's description of what his Christ is like, of what is in God's heart. Christ Crucified, sent to us by the Father, is God's first and last word to us: "I love you." The grief of the cross is the price he has paid for that love.²

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ By Mrs. David Dewey Alger, widow of one of the victims in Tower One.

² "Grief is the price we pay for love," the last sentence of the message of Queen Elizabeth to the congregation at Saint Thomas Church on September 20, 2001, will be inscribed, by her permission, in the stone beneath the memorial cross.