

Sermon for St. George's and Christ Church URC on Sunday 30th August 2020

Theme: Get behind me Satan

Bible reading: Matthew 16:21-28

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 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 they have done. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:24-28).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the events of this morning’s Bible reading came just after Peter had declared Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of the living God. And once the disciples understood that Jesus was the Christ of God, he began to talk to them about the cross. He revealed to them that he was going to be rejected by the Jewish authorities and killed and on the third day be raised to life.

But to Peter, these ideas of death and resurrection seemed contrary to his understanding of the Messiah. Surely, for Peter, the Christ who is the Son of the living God could not die! He rather expected him to be recognised and affirmed by the Jews and given the throne of his father David so that he would subdue the world, beginning with the Romans who were their enemies, and would rule the rest of the world on God’s behalf from Zion - Jerusalem. And so, since Peter did not grasp the concept of a suffering Messiah, he took Jesus aside and rebuked him.

Of course, Jesus did not play naïve to what Peter did. He perfectly understood Peter’s rebuke as a temptation from Satan, and so, he gave him the same sort of treatment that he had given to Satan when he came to tempt him after his baptism in the Jordan River, and forty days and forty nights fasting in the wilderness in Matthew 4. Matthew’s Gospel account records that,

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” (Matthew 4:8-10).

Similarly, in this encounter with Peter, Jesus rebuked Satan by saying, “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”.

What we ought to understand from this story as Christians today is that the cross was not optional for Jesus because it was an integral part of his mission; and there could be no glory without it. However, Jesus’ attitude towards the cross contrasts with that of many Christians of our time, who see the Christian way of life as easy-peasy. With the least uncomfortable situation they may find themselves, they are quick to question everything about the faith; even the very existence of God and the essence of being a Christian. Especially, in this era of the COVID-19 pandemic, globally, many Christians are questioning: where is God in all this?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is often said that “No Crown, No Cross”. In other words, there is no crown without a cross. Jesus was prepared to carry that heavy wooden old rugged cross to Calvary and died a painful death on a cross so that we may gain the glory of God.

Jesus expects no less of us who may be following him today. We ought to know as followers of Christ that we are cross-bearing disciples walking in the footsteps of our Master and Lord, and doing what he came to do. This calls for self-denial, endurance, and dependence on God.

It may interest you to know that all over the world, leaders who announce bad news to their followers are not normally liked. For example, at the spike of the global COVID 19 pandemic, many leaders around the world were really reluctant to disclose the rising figures of the death toll to avoid creating fear and panic among the general public.

Jesus, by telling his disciples about his imminent death did exactly the opposite of what many leaders of the world would have done. Surely, the news about his death doesn’t sound good to the disciples. Does it? No wonder Peter tackles him head-on! As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, how do we see God when things puzzle and overwhelm us? Things like betrayal, suffering, disappointment, or even death of a loved one.

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus traveled the way of the cross to save us. In the same way, we may also travel the way of the cross and death to eternal life. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life, Jesus admonishes in John 12:25.

This goes beyond dying physically. It is about removing those things that stand as obstacles in our way and capable of preventing us from inheriting eternal life; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of pride; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of racism; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of hatred; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of anger; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of lust; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of adultery; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of fornication; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of lying and bearing of false witness; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of dishonesty; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of cheating; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of insincerity; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of greed and corruption; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of discrimination; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of gossip; it is about saying get behind me the spirit of laziness; and, it is about saying get behind me the spirit of malice and impurity.

Ultimately, something inside of us must die to make way for the king of kings to dwell and remain in and with us.

No doubt, brothers and sisters, like the disciples of old, Jesus is calling us to the newness of life and of denying ourselves and taking up our cross and follow him daily. This means that we have to empty ourselves to get to the point where, like Paul, despite all his achievements, and all he had to boast of would say,

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3: 7-11).

Brothers and sisters, for us Christians, there is life in death. And beyond the cross lies the glory. The glory of God was shown in Jesus on the cross for our redemption. When we realise that we have nothing in ourselves that we can hold on to for our own survival and redemption; we turn to Christ for strength and shielding.

Do we then pray that the Spirit of God should drive out all forms of “Satan” in us? Do we then pray that the Spirit of God should continue to help us to be able to cultivate the habit of honouring others more than ourselves? Do we then pray that

the Holy Spirit should continue to inspire us to be decreased in self-glorification and allow God to be glorified in and through us? Do we then pray that Christ should continue to have mercy upon us for the evil we have been?

May God grant us grace and courage to be able to rebuke and resist and overcome evil and to stand firm in the faith until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ!

May the name of the living Lord be praised now and always!

Amen!

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