

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-27

***“Truth”***

If you remember from last week's Gospel reading, and sermon – Jesus had brought His apostles to the seat of pagan worship in the northern part of Israel, Caesarea Philippi - and it was here that Jesus asked them *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”* (Matthew 16:13) After they gave Him a list of who people were saying that He was – Jesus then put the most important question to them, and He asked, *“Who do you say I am?”* *Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* (Matthew 16:15-16)

The statement of faith that Peter made when he announced Jesus to be the Messiah, the *“Christ, the son of the living God”* would be the “rock,” the foundation of truth that would be the basis, the foundation of the church – a faith that endures. Saying “Jesus is a great teacher,” “oh, Jesus was a prophet, a preacher and a healer,” or “Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven, but not the only way” or that anyone else is “the Way, the Truth and the Life,” destroys and weakens that foundation – to the point of collapse and rubble. I must confess, it is unnerving and very unsettling when those statements come from within the Christian community. It dilutes, and waters down the faith – it is deceitful and it is false! It is straight from the father of lies.

So much happened following that proclamation by Peter, and Jesus had to give them a warning not to tell anyone about Him being the Christ. Jesus plainly tells the apostles that they will be witness to Him enduring a great deal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders in Jerusalem – which will result in His death. Consider, if you will, how much must have been swirling in their heads. They are at this evil place, and they have been asked two very important questions by Jesus – and then He drops the bombshell, the bad news right upon them about what is to come in Jerusalem, *“at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the Law”* (Matthew 16:21) The same Peter who answered Jesus' question – begins to rebuke Jesus by saying, *“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”* (Matthew 16:22) When Jesus responded to Peter's calling Him *“the Christ, the Son of the Living God”* He complemented Peter for listening to the words of God the Father, the truth, but when Peter said *“Never, Lord”* He tells Peter that those words are not inspired by God, but were evil, because Satan does not want Jesus to fulfill what He came to do, and that is to suffer and to die for the redemption of mankind. Jesus emphatically tells Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”* (Matthew 16:23)

If Jesus were not to die in accordance with the Father's plan, then Satan would win the victory in the battle for the human soul, and we would not be singing our ending hymn today “Victory in Jesus” instead it would be something else, and I daresay that we would not even be meeting here today! Peter was voicing Satan's opinion. Peter understood who Jesus was, but he failed to grasp the nature of His mission, thinking that since Jesus was the Messiah, that He had come to establish an earthly kingdom and to overthrow the Roman government. That was a pretty

big thought back in those day. Peter was right about who Jesus was, but wrong about why He had come!

As Jesus told Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”* (Matthew 16:23) He was trying to snap Peter back to the reality of Jesus’ mission. Peter was trying to re-define who Jesus was, and to make Him fit his own expectations. He wanted to see a King and His Kingdom – and not death and what would seem like apparent defeat. Redefining Jesus is not the work of God, but the work of Satan – and not understanding our Leader or our enemy.

In our human frailty, we forget that God thinks differently that we do. God Himself spoke through the Prophet Isaiah reminding the world, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9) How often it is that Jesus Himself speaks about how things with God are different. He said in Matthew 20:16, *“the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”* We try to judge, when it is not within our right, or our power. The Apostle Paul says that we only get a part of the reality of God, when he wrote to the people of Corinth, *“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”* (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Jesus warns His apostles that in order to follow Him, it will cost them everything. There are no half measures on this journey with Him. It is going to be like learning to swim: if you keep your foot on the bottom of the pool you will never work out how to do it. You have to lose your life to find it. What is the use of keeping your feet on the bottom when the water gets too deep? You have the choice: swim or drown. Kick or not! Apparent safety, walking on the bottom, is not an option! You either swim or you drown.

How confusing it must have been for the apostles to hear Jesus speak about taking up a cross. At this point in their relationship – the cross has never entered into the picture, but now Jesus said to them, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* (Matthew 16:24) The cross was the most denigrating way to die – the Romans used this to put people to death all the time, lining them up on the street side, so that people could come by as they were dying, and ridicule them, telling them how disgusting and horrible it was. Jesus is talking about taking up a cross – this must have been very confusing. Jesus, as the Son of God, is telling His apostles, and us that like in the Beatitudes – God’s expectations are much higher than ours. In order to follow Jesus, we have to learn to think inside out, as in looking-glass fashion: what the world counts as great is foolishness, and what the world counts folly is the true wisdom.

Have you ever taken a selfie with your phone – and it does not look quite right? When you look at it, your hair is parted on the wrong side – or the letters on your shirt or blouse are reversed? The image is not what we expect. Well it is the same thing in the Kingdom of God - cling on to

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your life and you will lose it; give everything you have got to follow Jesus, including life itself, and you will win it. We, as real followers of Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, need to take Him at His Word – and believe.