

Matthew 16:21-28
Cross purposes

No cross, no crown

You could be excused for thinking that we have slyly slipped into

A parallel universe

That's a much-overused theme for sci-fi, but as we look around our late 2020 world, we can see a curious mixture of sameness and difference. It's not like the nice-but logical

Mr Spock

Being replaced by nasty-but-logical Mr Spock, with the slight changes to uniform and makeup, in that early Star Trek episode. But while the traffic jams are seeming pretty much back to normal on the

Bypass to Hayle

And the

Rain comes down

To mess up another August holiday time ... but yet we have now become used to

Socially distanced queues
Shopping with masks on

The Royal Albert Hall

Is still there, but the famous

Last Night of the Proms

Takes place *without* the promenaders all crushing together to jig along with the Sailors' Hornpipe - or sing at the tops of their voices about Britons never being slaves.

Football matches

Seem almost the same - though I can't understand why it's OK for *those* guys to go for group hugs when they score a goal. A *most* confusing role model, I would say. The televised matches sound the same ... but then you see the empty stands and then remember that crowd sounds are fake.

The BBC did quite an interesting job on replacing their wall-to-wall coverage of

Wimbledon

With top matches from down through the years. So we caught a few snatches of the one-time commentator

Dan Maskell

With his famous “Oh I say!” when he saw a particularly skilful shot. Some of the best tennis rallies come when both players (or pairs... doubles matches can be good, too!) are on top form, and sometimes it seems that an unplayable serve (Oh I say!) is greeted by an unbelievable return (Oh I say!). The perfect drop shot (Oh I say!) is countered by a race across the court and a full-stretch cross-court winner (Oh I say!)

We have, I think, something of a rally like that at the beginning of today's passage. When we left Matthew's Gospel, back before the somewhat notional School Holidays, we had just read some pretty amazing statements. There was, you would probably say, the high point of the book so far, when Simon Peter comes out with this astounding declaration.

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

(Matthew 16:16)

That's an “Oh I say!” kind of moment. And Jesus affirms that he was right - and (Oh I say!!) gloriously blessed:

And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

(Matthew 16:17)

And yet, very curiously indeed, when you might have thought that this is finally it, the secret is out ... Jesus very firmly says that this is a truth that must be kept hidden.

Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

(Matthew 16:20)

And at that point - which I deliberately didn't stress then - you might have been wondering just why. How come, if this is true, that nobody must hear this truth? It really is odd, isn't it?

But it seems to me that the disciples have finally worked out Jesus'

Job title

But they didn't yet have much of an idea as regards his

Job description

... as witnessed by this jaw-dropping interchange between Jesus and Peter. "Oh I say!" is the response to the next three shots of these next three verses, particularly, as **Jesus begins to teach his disciples more thoroughly that the cross (his and theirs) must be carried before the glories of his kingdom dawn**

The correction of the Christ
The challenge of the cross

- **The correction of the Christ (21-23)**

It's clearly a new phase of the disciples' training. I can remember the talk that we had back at school when we had finished O-levels - GCSE nowadays - and moving on up to A-levels. The work was going to be so much harder, we were told. The amount of homework we would be expected to do was going to increase seriously.

We also found, doing the course work, that some things were a whole lot more complex than the version we had been previously taught. Just like all good Jewish lads knew what "Messiah" meant ... or so they thought.

Because the Messiah was not just God's anointed - the technical meaning - but would be his mighty king and saviour, too. A national deliverer. Even a long time afterwards that idea was lingering in the disciples' minds. Remember *after* Jesus' resurrection?

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

(Acts 1:6)

See, that's *really* Messiah's job. It's finally going to happen, isn't it? You're going to get Israel back on track, right? Get shot of those horrible Romans occupying the land God promised to Abraham's descendants. Finally, all these days of oppression have to end ... and the oppressors will be sent off with

Tail between legs

Only, says Jesus, you have got that bit wrong. The title fits, but the description is wrong. *This* is how it is:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

So just notice that "**from that time**". It implies a turning of the corner, we might put it as. Now that these disciples know that Jesus is "the Christ", it's time for them to find out what that really means. And it's important that they don't go out and mislead people about it yet, while they are still actually quite benighted about the

details.

And notice also “**began to show**”. Matthew is being very clear here that this isn’t just a once-off lesson. This will take a whole *course* of lessons. What Jesus is going to be teaching is so profound, so far-reaching ... and so contrary to our normal way of thinking ... that it will take time and multiple repetitions to sink in.

Folks, think about that nowadays, too. I’ve heard it said that it takes something like 40 times for someone to hear the Gospel before they “get it”. Now that’s just a guess, and it seems to be talking only about the human side of the equation, and leaving out the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing someone to conversion. I’m not saying it’s automatic, and that if we just keep plugging away, then eventually that

penny will drop

No, I’m still talking the *miracle* of new birth here. But even when the Holy Spirit *is* at work, it typically takes time, and it typically takes repeated hearing of God’s truth.

And I think we have to realise that the same is true *after* we have been saved. It’s the same Holy Spirit at work in us, it’s the same Word of God that the Spirit uses to instruct us with ... but these lessons take *time*. Some, I’m sure, it will take a *lifetime* and more. So ...

... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

(2 Peter 3:18)

And even now, if, after several decades of still not quite getting it, you are starting to despair of ever really grasping the ...

... the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, ...

(Ephesians 3:18-19)

Well, just remember what you see here in Matthew 16, the patience of Jesus who *began to show his disciples...* knowing it was going to be a long, slow job. Because, just look how startling the contents of this course are!

... that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

It’s still quite basic stuff, without a whole lot of detail as yet. Perhaps Jesus realised that they weren’t yet ready for what would be some rather gruesome detail. So first ... the time that they had recently mainly spent up north in Galilee, relatively safe from trouble, is going to finish. He must go to Jerusalem.

It’s a *must*. *All* of this is not just an idea or an option, it’s a must. Think about

that one. These things *must* happen. There is only one way that the disciples, or believers down through the ages ... you and I ... can be saved. It *must* be this way. The all-wise and all-knowing God could devise no better plan.

We'd say nowadays - with quite a bit more hindsight - that it has to be "the way of the cross". But right at the outset, it doesn't look as if Jesus specifies this. Instead, simply "**suffer many things**" - details, terrible, horrendous details to follow.

And that suffering is going to come from what *should* be the least expected source. John's summary of Jesus, remember?

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

(John 1:11)

And the very leaders of these "his own" people, the ones who should have been most in command of all the facts relating to the Messiah ... *they* will be the ones rejecting him and inflicting these "many things".

... that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

There would be no half-measures. No letting up in the suffering. It will be fatal: "**and be killed**".

But although it will be fatal ... bizarrely, impossibly ... it will not be *final*: "**and on the third day be raised**".

All of these, says Jesus, are imperatives; they *must*. *Oh I say!*

...

But what do you make of Peter's response? Can't you identify with him? Don't you feel something along these lines too? Couldn't you imagine yourself saying similar words?

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

(Matthew 16:22)

After all, there is a certain rightness to Peter's words, isn't there? If you substitute "should" for "shall", I would have said. Nobody ever *less* deserved that treatment, did they? Listen to Peter speaking about him and those Jewish leaders later on, in Acts:

"The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this

we are witnesses.”

(Acts 3:13-15)

That is *awful* injustice. It *deserves* to be spoken up against. Do you see Peter's predicament, that strange paradox of the Cross? It *must not* be. This is totally unjust. And yet it *must* be. For this is God's way of justly dealing with sin. This is the Lamb of God we're talking about - as well as the Messiah ...

“... the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

(John 1:29)

And yet, for all that Peter's reaction was really so understandable, we have to also say it was so *wrong*, too. I mean, when you consider just who he was speaking to ...!

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

(Matthew 16:22)

Seriously? *Rebuke* Jesus?? Although Matthew does insert here “began to” ... perhaps just as well that, by the looks of it, Jesus did not let him get up a full head of steam. The lecture was interrupted before he could get properly started. But just the initial words say quite enough.

Matthew translates Peter's initial word as one which literally means something like “graciously to you, Lord”. Not this awful way, but *graciously*. And isn't that strangely telling? God the Father could not show this grace to his son ... because otherwise there would be no grace for us. Those terrible taunts on the cross were so close to home, too:

“He saved others; he cannot save himself”

(Matthew 27:42)

It is grace for him, or grace for us. It cannot be both. And Peter states in the most emphatic words, *This will never be*.

Folks, aren't we sometimes just like Peter? Not in the sense of simply wishing that his beloved master would be spared this awful future, but in the sense of saying that it just cannot be that my sins are so foul that it will take the death of the Lord of life in order to pardon them. Surely I cannot be in such desperate need of something so momentous? I'm not really *that* bad, am I? This cannot be right!

Notice that Peter has overlooked that promise of Jesus' resurrection, by the way. I'm guessing that he is so overwhelmed by the enormity of what Jesus says will precede it that he mentally switches off that glorious light at the end of the tunnel.

But if Peter's contradiction of Jesus is quite jaw-dropping, doesn't Jesus' response to him also, at first reading, seem pretty much over the top, too? Another *Oh I say!*

But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

(Matthew 16:23)

I mean, calling one of his disciples “Satan”! Perhaps only minutes earlier - certainly just a few verses earlier, this was Peter the rock, a man blessed by revelation from God himself. And now ... *Satan*?

Maybe we need to remember that “Satan” in the OT is not so much a name as a description. “The Satan” is really “the Adversary” - but usually deserving a capital letter. So perhaps Jesus is saying something which is not quite so extreme, that Peter, with these words, has now become *an* adversary of Jesus ... and he needs to get back in his proper place, behind Jesus, *following* him, rather than opposing him, the place that really befits a disciple.

And yet those are very similar words to those that Jesus spoke to the tempter:

Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan!”

(Matthew 4:10)

“Begone” there is exactly the same word as “*get* behind me”. And Peter’s words echo one of the tempter’s traps, too. *Take the easy path. Avoid that terrible cross! There is a simpler, less painful way.* Remember it?

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

(Matthew 4:8-9)

So Peter has now almost become Satan’s puppet, putting forward that alternative understanding of things, that deadly twisting of the truth that is so much more seductive than the full-on, outright lie.

Folks, do you not think that these words of Jesus are so very, very broadly applicable to us individually, and us as a society nowadays? Where do so many of our problems originate, when it comes down to it? It’s deciding that we know better than the all-knowing God. Just as Jesus says to Peter:

“For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

(Matthew 16:23)

You are claiming that human reason is all it really takes - and forgetting the activity of the Adversary in clouding that reason:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

(2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

Folks, where does *what God has said* feature in your thinking? What do your minds rest on? What mental

Gears

Drive your thinking? What are the mental

Foundations

Upon which you build? When you have some kind of problem or question in life, do you check out first what *God* has put on record for our understanding and learning, or do we just rely upon our gut feelings or folk wisdom? Do you rely upon Government pronouncements or some article you read on the Internet? Does God come first or last in those processes of consideration? Do you

plant your feet

Firmly on what you know or find is taught by Scripture, or do you let the world determine the shape of the

Mould

And hope that you can pour God into the space that you've left for him?

“For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

(Matthew 16:23)

And every time you hear or read Scripture, and start your mental or verbal response with a *but* ... Beware! Every time I hear someone say, in that context, “But I like to think that ...” - well, that is precisely it. They *like* to think that way, and they are not at all happy for the way they *like* to think to be challenged by the truth of the God who cannot lie.

Folks, let us beware of correcting Jesus Christ - for he may need to turn to rebuke *us* with these words. Will it be, *Get behind me, out of my sight*, if you insist on those words and thoughts sponsored by the Tempter, the Adversary? Or will it be, *Get back in line and follow me*, if you will repent of those falsehoods, and distance yourself from those lies, and return to the proper position of a disciple of Jesus Christ?

And specifically, will you fall in line with what he says about

- **The challenge of the cross (24-28)**

The conversation with Peter was perhaps apart from the rest of the disciples:

And Peter took him aside ...

(Matthew 16:22)

But now Jesus turns back to include them all.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

(Matthew 16:24)

Let's quickly get a couple of points clear. That phrase "we all have our crosses to bear" is usually a bit of worldly wisdom. You will hear all sorts of people say this about all sorts of pains or inconveniences.

The ache of rheumatism The noisy neighbours

Folks, those aren't "crosses". Crosses are things that *only* disciples of Christ are called to bear. You don't get rheumatism or noisy neighbours or stuff like that simply because you follow Jesus. This is the kind of stuff Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

(Matthew 5:11)

And "denying yourself" isn't a question of stuff like foregoing

Chocolate

You could call that denying, saying No, to your *appetites* - literally, in that case. But not saying No to *yourself*, denying *yourself*. Denying *yourself* is about sitting under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Of opening yourself to his gracious rulership. Of giving him full privilege to determine the course of your life. Instead of insisting that *I* will call the shots, because it's *my* life, it is denying that precedence of *I*. Instead it will be *him*. *He* calls the tune, not me. *He* determines the standards I will live by, not me.

I don't mean the church, or the cruel dictates of an over-active conscience, but Jesus Christ himself as your Lord.

*What he says, we will do
Where he sends, we will go
Never fear, only trust and obey*

Because, look, the reasons for living this way are overwhelming. At the beginning of each of the following verses, the logic of *for* stacks up over and over. Deny yourself. Take up that cross. Why? First, a statement:

"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

(Matthew 16:25)

Next, an unanswerable question:

“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”

(Matthew 16:26)

And finally, another statement putting all of this into the context of eternity:

“For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”

(Matthew 16:27)

Folks, *this Jesus* is the one we are dealing with here. Not just the speaker of those challenging words, but the one who will return and bring reckoning. Have we walked the narrow way of the cross, or have we been tempted to throw it off and pour out our lives instead on things that will end up as no more than worthless glass baubles, and not the jewels we had taken them to be?

That day of reckoning is certain. That kingdom is coming.

“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

(Matthew 16:28)

Not “come”, but *coming*. You will start to see glimmerings of it, perhaps a few days later, in the next section of the book, what we call The Transfiguration; the kingdom is coming. Or more clearly when Jesus’ prediction “and on the third day be raised”, is fulfilled; the kingdom is coming. Or down through the days of subsequent history that we read in Acts, as the church is given power from on high and goes out with the Gospel; the kingdom is coming. Or when, still in those disciples’ future and ours, when

... the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

(1 Thessalonians 4:16)

And the King of kings arrives to finally and fully inaugurate that kingdom. And the kingdom that is coming will finally have *come*.

Folks, with no cross, there would be no crown. This is the only path to glory.

*I take, O cross, thy shadow
For my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than
The sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by,
To know no gain nor loss,
My sinful self my only shame,
My glory all the cross.*

