

# The Glorious Freedom of the Cross

## Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: September 3, 2023

## Readings

Jeremiah 15.15-21

Psalm 26

Romans 12.1-8

Matthew 16.21-27

## Opening

‘To be continued...’ Most of the TV shows we watch these days don’t need that concluding caption at the end of an episode. Storytelling in a serial format is the fashion these days. But if you were growing up in the 1980s, watching *Dukes of Hazard* and *Knight Rider*, and an episode ever concluded with ‘to be continued,’ you wondered what just happened. Most every episode was standalone—setup, conflict, resolution, credits. But when the caption appeared, ‘to be continued,’ you knew this was serious. This wasn’t like your standard episode. You have to wait til next Friday to see if Bo and Luke Duke can evade Roscoe P. Coletrain once again, though you know they will. No streaming or on-demand in those days; not even 30 channels. You best be in your seat by 7pm Friday or you’ll miss what’s happening next.

Last week, we heard the story of Peter’s confession, but it’s a story that continues beyond the confession itself. It would be terribly incomplete to read Peter’s confession as a standalone story, ending the episode at verse 20 where our Gospel reading concluded last week. Therein lies the wisdom of our church, that our lectionary extends this episode across consecutive weeks.

St Matthew intends us to read this as one episode with two related parts, two scenes in a single episode, if you will. The thread connecting the two scenes is the symbol of the rock. It’s present immediately after Peter’s confession, yet Christ invokes stone imagery again when he rebukes Peter, too.

## Section 1

You’ve often heard it said that we live by stories and certainly that is so. It’s also true that we live by images. And the two are really inseparable. Scripture itself is a grand story—a grand story, full of recurring images that develop from one author to the next, or with a single author, or even a single chapter. That’s the case with Matthew’s Gospel.

Last week, we focused on the image of the rock in Peter's great confession of Jesus, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!' Whereas the image of the rock represented the wisdom of God in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, we find that the rock in Matthew 16 signifies the confession of Christ. The rock *also* represents the apostles—represented by their leader, Peter. These are the chosen ones, called to build their lives, their house, on the teachings of Jesus. *And* they are called to teach others, even the whole world, the truth of the Kingdom of God. The apostles themselves—their confession of Christ and the whole body of teaching Jesus entrusted to them—this is the solid rock upon which the church will be built. St Paul picks up this doctrine from Matthew's Gospel when he writes to the Ephesians that the household of God is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.'<sup>1</sup>

Now even when we read Peter's confession on its own, such as last Sunday, we feel the momentum building. Peter has a new name—from Simon to Petra, meaning rock—he's given the keys of the Kingdom, he has a fortifying promise that the gates of hell won't prevail against the church; he's given authority of binding and loosing, a sign that Peter and the apostles will, in fact, do the very same works the Lord himself has been doing. And then the most unexpected twist happens in verse 20 from last week's reading. 'And (Jesus) strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.' It's the ancient parallel of 'to be continued...'

As this episode moves from one conversation at Caesarea Philippi to the ensuing conversation in Matthew 16, both the conversation and the image of the rock undergo a radical shift. The shift in the conversation is verse 20, what theologians have called 'the messianic secret.' Why does Jesus put his divine identity on the q.t.?

So why not shout it from the rooftops? Isn't that the normal instinct when something wonderful happens? When you're hired for a new job, when you fall in love, when a child is born, when you're accepted in the college you wanted most—you want to tell everyone the good news that's happened. It's so contrary to our instincts to conceal good news.

And yet this is precisely what the Lord Jesus does. There's not only a restriction, Jesus *strictly* charged them to say nothing about his true nature.

## Jesus' Forceful Rebuke

And with that restriction, the episode moves from one seen to the next, with an abrupt change in the tenor of conversation. It's like one of my beloved trails at House Mountain. It starts out straight and gentle, but soon the ascent becomes steep. Instead of straight paths, there's a section of sharp switchbacks leading me up the mountain.

*Matthew 16:21–23 (ESV) 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.*

Peter has rightly confessed the Name of Jesus. He is the Christ, the Anointed One. The revelation was a gift from heaven, not his own powers of logic. And now Peter's logic has run out of track. Peter knows the ancient name. All Israel had been longing, waiting, seeking Messiah to come for centuries. Peter has confessed the Man who is Messiah, but Peter doesn't know what Messiah *means*. Peter has

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2.22

already settled in his mind what Messiah ought to be. The Christ does not, cannot, and *will* not suffer. And thus Peter responds:

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

And in that rebuke of Peter, the image of the stone returns. It's not easily seen in our English translation, though the ESV often has a footnote about what the word 'hindrance' means in Greek. So let's give it a literal meaning from its original language: 'Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a **stumbling stone** to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'

In a matter of moments, Peter has been honored as the rock for his strong confession, entrusted with all authority in Jesus' kingdom, and now Peter's name has a double meaning. Now Peter has become a trip hazard on the way of the cross. He's an obstruction, he's standing in opposition to the will of God. He's become an instrument of Jesus' ancient adversary—Satan. Trying to do good, trying to be loyal and loving, Peter opposes the very mystery of cosmic redemption. The worst thing Peter can imagine is a Christ who suffers. 'You'll have to come through me before that ever happens.'

Notice the *force* of Jesus' rebuke. If you were to do a Bible study in the Gospels of all of Jesus' rebukes, the Lord's rebuke of Peter would be perhaps the most forceful. Consider just one other rebuke in the Gospels. When Jesus learns Herod wants to kill him, the Lord sends messengers to Herod saying, 'Go and tell that fox 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'<sup>2</sup>

Jesus called Herod a fox, but when Peter rebuked the Lord, Jesus heard the voice of Satan behind Peter. To reject the cross is one of the most dangerous spiritual errors one can make. There's so much at stake in rejecting the cross, not just for Peter, but for the Kingdom entrusted to Peter at Caesarea Philippi. As one theologian said, 'Peter, who protects the community against the forces of the underworld, himself becomes their tool.'<sup>3</sup>

## Accepting the Cross

Thankfully, we know the end of the story; that Peter does not remain in this place. In fact, the ending of this episode is an enigma itself, which I'll address in a moment.

But first we need to meditate on Jesus' words in his correction of Peter: the Lord says Peter's mind was not set on the things of God, but on the things of man. Notice the contrast Jesus makes. Human thinking avoids suffering at all costs. The survival instinct runs deep, to avoid pain, rather than accept it. That's human thinking. But divine wisdom uses the suffering of Christ to accomplish redemption and freedom. And the redemption and freedom accomplished in Christ becomes our inheritance. Through our suffering, we can find freedom, too. 'For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke 13.32

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16.25

The book I recommend most often for the inner life is Jacques Philippe's *Interior Freedom*. We've sold it at our book table, have sold out, and now reordered some more copies that should arrive next week. One of the most memorable passages in that little book is about finding freedom through suffering. Philippe writes:

*The worse pain of suffering lies in rejecting it. To the pain itself we then add rebellion, resentment, and the upset this suffering arouses in us. The tension within us increases our pain. But when we have the grace to accept suffering and consent to it, it becomes at once much less painful.*

Philippe wisely recognizes there is a great difference between 'accepting things grudgingly' and truly consenting to suffering—'not enduring (sufferings) only, but in a sense 'choosing' them'.<sup>5</sup>Suffering is not something that we can control. It is in the attempt to control suffering that it worsens. This is why our Lord Jesus is the great icon of redemptive suffering. By fully *consenting* to suffering—'Not my will but yours be done'—our Lord Jesus won our freedom from sin and death.

We speak often, especially in Eastertide, that Christ has removed the sting of death, the fear of death. We ought to embrace that Jesus' death and resurrection also means we also do not need to fear suffering *before* death. The great Jewish martyr, Etty Hillysum, said, 'Man suffers most through his fear of suffering.'<sup>6</sup>

But because of Christ Jesus, who denied himself and took up *his* cross, we can face any form of suffering with peace and calm acceptance. And not just peace and calm acceptance, but also an encounter with glory.

## Conclusion

And that brings me to the strange conclusion of this story. After Jesus rebukes Peter, we don't hear from Peter again in this episode. If we were reading Matthew's Gospel for the first time, we'd wonder at this point—will Peter become the solid rock of the apostles, or does he remain a stumbling stone, a scandal and obstacle to the Lord?

I suppose we'd have another 'to be continued.' However, our lectionary doesn't lead us into the next episode of Matthew's Gospel; instead, we'll skip a chapter and pick up next week in Matthew 18.

But in Matthew's story, the next episode *does* give us an answer of sorts. After this rebuke and the call to take up the cross, while Peter remains silent and stunned after Jesus' rebuke, Jesus brings Peter and James and John up another high mountain—the mountain of our Lord's transfiguration where they will see his glory. They will see the Lord's glory *before* he is crucified, so that they will know that the Christ willingly chooses the cross though he is the eternal Son of the Father.

But what gives me such great hope is this—that Peter, having scorned suffering and the way of the cross, is not resigned to failure. No, the Lord is patient. Though he rebuke Peter in one moment, in the next moment he pursues Peter. Peter was not a stumbling block himself, the stumbling block was his mind. Once the Lord clears that obstruction, setting Peter's mind on heavenly things, Jesus invites

---

<sup>5</sup> Philippe, *Interior Freedom*, 44-46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Peter not only to think on heavenly things, but to see Heaven on earth. 'Come up the mountain Peter. Come see my glory that chooses the cross.'

Though we refuse the cross, though we fear suffering, though we faint and fail, the Lord does not abandon us—he does not abandon those who have confessed his name as the Christ. No, he pursues us. He trains us. He invites to get up and begin again. He reveals to us that there is no other Christ but the crucified and risen Christ.

There is no glory without the cross. There is no freedom in rejecting the cross. But, because of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, we believe that the way of the cross is none other than the way of life and freedom. And remember—it was for freedom that Christ Jesus set us free, and all for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.