

The Sanctuary of the Soul

Meta

Date: February 25, 2024; Lent 2B

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Genesis 22:1–14

Psalms 16

Romans 8:31–39

Mark 8:31–38

Opening

I would like to begin where I left off last Sunday. Last Sunday we followed Jesus from his baptism in the River Jordan and into the arena—the wilderness arena of Satan’s temptation. For a second consecutive Sunday, we encounter the devil in the Gospel reading. Satan appears suddenly, right after a high and holy moment in the Gospels.

Our portion of this Gospel reading begins right after St. Peter answered Jesus’ question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ ‘You are the Christ,’ Peter replied. Not John the Baptist, not Elijah, not one of the prophets. You are the Anointed One of God—the Savior and King for whom we have waited.

Peter’s Great Confession is the context for Jesus’ prophetic teaching about the rejection, suffering, and death he must endure before he rises from the dead. In St. Mark’s account, no sooner than Peter utters the words, ‘You are the Christ,’ does Jesus Christ begin to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things, die, and then rise again. The message was clear: there is no other Christ besides, Jesus, the Son of Man, who will suffer and die on a Roman cross; who will conquer death three days following his crucifixion.

Jesus foretold that elders, chief priests, and scribes would reject him in coming days, but lo and behold, the newly minted chief of the apostles, Peter, has rejected the newly confessed Christ before they ever reach Jerusalem. The most exalted words a human being could utter about Jesus, ‘You are the Christ,’ the very confession of faith, the words of salvation, have been followed with a rebuke. Peter corrects Christ about the kind of Christ he ought to be. More on this later.

First, let’s recall the principle I mentioned last week: Satan prowls like a lion, and he often prowls around the vicinity of holy things—holy people, holy words, and holy events. Peter speaks holy words at Caesarea Philippi, confesses Jesus is the Christ at Caesarea Philippi. In the next moment, Peter rebuked Jesus for teaching the Christ must suffer and die. In that rebuke, our Lord Jesus sensed the Enemy was near. Because Satan prowls around the vicinity of holy words and holy moments. He seeks to dismantle the faith of holy men and women who confess Jesus as the Christ, as Peter did. Just as

Jesus renounced the Enemy in the desert after his baptism, so our Lord renounces the Enemy after Peter's rejection of the cross. confession. 'Get behind me, Satan.'

Confession and Renunciation

Let's pause to understand two fundamental truths about Satan's strategy in the assault of temptation. Satan desires that we break the commandments of God and especially the first commandments in the Ten Commandments. Our greatest temptation is to conform God to our image of what we believe he ought to be. Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ and then immediately broke the first commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' He violated the first commandment and the second commandment; to shape God according to his likeness and image. Can you imagine Moses correcting God when he was on Mount Sinai for 40 days, engulfed in the cloud of God's awesome glory? Yet Peter rejected the divine revelation of who God is—a suffering God. This is one of the strongest and most lethal of temptations, a temptation that comes to all of us. While Moses was receiving the revelation of truth and glory, Israel formed golden calves to worship at the base of Sinai. From the temptation to make God in our own image, all other sins will follow, lust, lying, greed, envy, and all the rest. That's the snare we must escape first of all.

Secondly, one of the strongest temptations we face will be the rejecting the way of the cross; refusing to take up our own crosses. It's really quite simple: renouncing the cross is demonic. The sharp encounter at Caesarea Phillipi makes that clear, 'Get behind me, Satan' is the only fitting response when Peter rejects the way of the cross.

Now this is interesting in light of the wisdom of the New Testament letters regarding the correction of a brother in error. The teaching is almost always that correction be given with gentleness. Paul gives this instruction to Timothy in his pastoral work. When writing about Jesus' high priesthood for us, the Letter to the Hebrews says that 'every high priest can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward.'¹

Jesus is not gentle with Peter when he says, 'Get behind me, Satan.' Because our Lord knows the eternal danger of renouncing the cross. *Peter's mind must be converted after his great confession.* So must ours. Peter perceives the cross as a threat; but Christ commends the cross because it will save his soul.

The Soul and the Medicine of Repentance

The soul, the soul, the soul. That's what's at stake when we accept or refuse the cross. 'For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul?'² We should hear an echo from those days when our Lord was tempted by the Enemy. Satan promised Jesus all the kingdoms of the world would be his if he would bow down and worship Satan. Our Lord not only rejected Satan, he perceived the trap. If he could receive all the kingdoms of the world, he would lose his heart. Because that which we worship receives our heart. It is not a question whether you will give your heart, your soul, when you worship. It is a question of what or whom you worship with your heart.

¹ Hebrews 5.2

² The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mk 8:36–37.

The Gospel truth we often miss in this passage is the awesome treasure that is your soul. Nothing this world has to offer can compare with the treasure house of the soul. God made your soul to be his temple, his very own dwelling place. There is nothing more precious than that place where God desires to make his home within us.

Our soul was made for eternity with God, yet the Enemy deceives us that for our soul to be fully alive, we have to live for *this* world and *this* life. It's up to us to find the life we desire. And Jesus comes and says, 'you must lose your life to find it.'

Let's transpose Jesus' words about the world and hear them for more particular situations. Here's one I've rehearsed for myself and others in ministry:

❖ What does it profit you if you gain the ministry of your dreams but forfeit your your inner life?

Or in the realm of family relationships and friendships:

❖ What do you gain if you prove you were right in every matter, if you win every argument, but your soul becomes diseased with pride?

Or in that inner battle to be recognized for our talents:

❖ What does it profit if you received all the compliments and recognition you feel you deserve, but lose your soul in the praise of men?

We could continue to transpose this verse for more personal applications. It's a good exercise for self-examination and possibly confession. Christ has made our soul for eternal life, for eternal joy. Do not settle for the temporary, fading joys of this life. Fix your heart, your soul, on the joy of what's coming. That's how we can take up your cross and follow Jesus in this life. It is not just brute, pointless discipline. When we take up our cross, we have the promise of resurrection life. With our hearts fixed on the promise of resurrection, we can endure all manner of trials and suffering. We can even be content in the very heat of those trials.

On Contentment

I believe it was Fr Thomas Hopko who said, 'It's very difficult to tempt a contented man.' Contentment is not only a great spiritual virtue, it is a great spiritual weapon. After our Lord Jesus, St. Paul learned better than any other saint how to be content when bearing his cross. St. Paul said:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.³

Not a few athletes like to quote that verse, but I believe it's even more fitting for spiritual athletes in the arena of trials and temptations.

Jeremy Taylor is one of the finest saints our Anglican Church has formed, a man who endured tremendous sufferings himself. Bishop Taylor said, 'God has appointed one remedy for all the evils in

³ *Philippians 4.12-13*

the world, and that is a contented spirit: for this alone makes a man pass through fire, and not be scorched; through seas, and not be drowned; through hunger and nakedness, and want nothing.⁴

The secret of contentment lies in the source of one's peace. Nothing this world or this life could offer gave St. Paul the contentment and peace his soul needed. In fact, he counted all things this world had given him as loss, as rubbish, when he gained the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. And we're back to last week's message—fight with your baptism! Your baptism gives you the contentment of knowing Christ alone in your soul.

There is no greater treasure than knowing the love of God in your soul. We have known his love and yet we have not seen him. Our greatest longing is to see Christ face to face—to know Him as we are fully known by him! If we have lost touch with that longing; if it has been suppressed or choked by the cares of this life, it's Lent. We can repent and redirect our gaze toward the promise of eternal life with Jesus.

When your eyes are fixed on the prize of eternal life, we can not only face trials with contentment, we can have confidence that the love of God is stronger than any adversity we endure. St Paul spoke from his heart and his own suffering when he wrote:

It is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that is the source of our confidence, the source of our contentment. It's all grace, given to us in baptism—the love of God abiding in the sanctuary of your soul.

Recently I discovered this prayer appointed for every hour. I've begun commending it, especially to those who face unrelenting trials and difficulties. I offer this as a closing prayer for those bearing their cross yet longing for Christ above all things:

At every time and at every hour in heaven and on earth You are worshipped and glorified, O Christ our God, You who are longsuffering, most merciful, most compassionate, who love the just and are merciful to sinners, who call all to salvation through the promise of the good things to come. Accept, O Lord, our entreaties at this hour, and guide our lives that we may keep your commandments. Sanctify our souls, purify our bodies, correct our thoughts, purify our ideas, and deliver us from all distress, evil, and pain. Surround us with Your holy angels that, protected and guided by their host, we may attain unity of faith and the knowledge of Your unapproachable glory. For blessed are You forever and ever. Amen

⁴ Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co.; Henry Frowde, 1890), 96.