

T 12, Proper 17

Last week we heard the passage directly before today's gospel, in which Peter publicly recognizes and acknowledges Jesus as 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God', and Jesus responds by commending this faith - 'You are Peter (a nickname, perhaps 'Rocky'), and on this rock I will build my church.'

It is at least mildly surprising to hear the next paragraph this morning and discover the newly-minted hero apparently *demonized* by the very Son of God he's just correctly identified. His fresh understanding surely makes it worse: name-calling by a Rabbi probably isn't a Jewish boy's favourite experience; but Rabbis are just human beings. When you've just realized and publicly affirmed that you are talking to someone uniquely connected to God who then calls you 'Satan' you might be a little disappointed.

As he tells us this, Matthew deliberately refers back to the temptation of Jesus twelve chapters earlier. You'll remember how that goes:

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Note, 'the *tempter*'. Then, the crucial punch line for what we heard this morning, Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" [4.10]

'Get behind me Satan', is now easier to understand. Jesus is not calling Peter 'the devil'. He is saying to Peter, 'you're tempting me as I was tempted at the beginning', tempting me to give the whole thing up and preach magic and easy answers: I say now as I said then 'Get behind me, Satan'. Jesus is saying to Peter, 'Don't make my proclamation domestic and cosy and smooth, don't remove the rough edges of truth'.

We all do that with our faith: we take diamonds and somehow turn them into paste: offered something beautiful and challenging, we remove the edge so that we can live with it; we replace it with a cheaper substitute. Worse yet, all too often we yield to a further temptation to add a new edge of challenge for others, a new setting for the fake gem, which always conveniently scratches someone else, someone less pious than I believe myself to be: the other, whether in terms of religion, race, sexual morality, culpability, or whatever it may be.

Jesus always reminds us, as he reminds Peter here: 'look to yourself'. The challenge is to me, to each Christian, or it is to no one. Don't make a burden for someone else; take up *your own* cross, he says, and follow. Then glory awaits.

Jesus never *pretends*, in speech or prayer. He does pray to be spared the cross. On the cross he cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And he speaks

plainly to Peter. One moment he affectionately calls him 'Rocky', the next, 'Satan'. Peter, he says, is doing what that 'old enemy' has always done, suggesting that there are easier ways of doing what God wants, without inconvenience, without anyone suffering. Least of all me. Peter, having publicly recognized Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, hasn't yet understood that his sovereignty will be exercised with and through suffering. He's after a celebrity Messiah, not a loser.

That is arguably even more counter-cultural today than it was 2000 years ago. We really don't expect any transaction to cost us very dearly, unless we're buying a house in London. Pretty well everything else in our world is cheap, compared even with our parents' experience; certainly easy compared with most of the rest of the world.

Perhaps we can understand Peter's failure of imagination in that way. He is looking for Easter without Good Friday, let alone Lent. We not only want instant gratification; we also take it for granted. But everything in the biblical narrative warns us to take a longer view of what will endure, of what has value. We all know that things we achieve through diligent application and commitment change who we are and mean more than easy wins. Jesus teaches this that learned truth expresses a principle that inheres in the created order. He sums it up today with a classic Gospel paradox: those who lose their life for my sake will find it; to take up the cross is to learn that, in the Kingdom, the true grammar of human life, enduring glory is not money or power but life in the presence of God; the peace of God which passes all understanding.

'Get behind me, Satan'. Jesus' expressed justification for the name-calling is very simple. Jesus tells Peter that he is a 'stumbling-block' to him. This is the key, an interesting word that occurs often in the Gospels. A 'stumbling-block' is what it says on the tin, anything you fall over – like the cat – on the way from A to B; something that diverts or tempts you from the straightforward journey. What Peter has said is a stumbling-block for Jesus, because it is a potential trip wire across his path to the cross, which he and we must face; a trip wire he's encountered from the beginning and thought he'd put behind him. Now this trap turns up in the mouth of the person he's just entrusted the future of his project, the building of God's kingdom. Hence the irritation.

God is anti-celebrity. That means God is *for* commitment and engagement, *for* the hard slog of building relationships rather than merely feeling good (he doesn't have anything *against* us feeling good; he just wants us to learn how to make it last, life with the quality of eternity). Jesus reminds Peter of the principle of the incarnation and the core of the gospel, that only growth embedded in hard-won relationships builds the kingdom and opens up the truth.