

Matthew 16:22-23

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to 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.”

If, as I try to do, you engage others in conversation about your faith

- It is amazing what strange ideas people have about who Jesus is
- And what Christians actually believe
- Such misunderstandings or misconceptions are nothing new
- In our readings in Matthew’s Gospel, we see misunderstandings and misconceptions

The Palm Sunday story (Matthew 21) is about Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem

- We know from the closing verses of the previous chapter
- That Jesus has previously been in Jericho – and healed two blind men
- Who called out to him, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us”
- There was a Roman military road from Jericho to Jerusalem
- And this passed through Bethany and nearby Bethphage

Matthew gives some attention to the ride on the colt (a young donkey) that Jesus arranged

- Although it was not unusual for a man to ride a donkey
- This particular donkey was a beast of burden, that had not previously been ridden
- Nevertheless, the animal remains calm in the hands of Jesus
- Despite the journey through a very large and noisy crowd

Matthew is always very interested in how the actions of Jesus fulfil Old Testament scriptures

- And this story is no exception – riding on a donkey fulfils the words of the prophet
- To the citizens of Jerusalem, ‘see your king comes to you ...
- Gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey’
- In a hotter and drier climate than ours, spreading palm branches across the road
- Would presumably lessen the amount of dust that the crowds would kick up
- While waving palm branches was associated with the arrival of a dignitary

The words of praise that the crowds call out come primary from Psalm 118:25-26

- Although not translated, ‘Hosanna’ is a Hebrew word
- Originally a cry for help (save!) it had become a blessing or an acclamation
- Like the blind men in Jericho, the crowd called out to the Son of David
- But although Son of David was a title for the Messiah
- It seems that Jesus was not coming as a political Messiah to oust the Romans
- But as a man of peace

The question asked by the citizens of Jerusalem, ‘Who is this?’

- Does not imply that Jesus was unknown in Jerusalem
- Although his ministry had been mainly in Galilee, Jesus had been to Jerusalem before
- And his miraculous doings were undoubtedly widely known
- It is an enquiry as to who it could be whose arrival had created such a commotion
- The simple answer is, ‘Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee’
- But Matthew has already recorded that Jesus was far more than that

Earlier, in Chapter 16, Matthew records a significant turning point in the ministry of Jesus

- At this time, Jesus had journeyed north to Caesarea Philippi
- near Mount Hermon, about twenty-five miles north of Galilee
- Philip the tetrarch had enlarged the town
- renaming it to honour the emperor and himself
- in a largely Gentile environment, Jesus was able to take a break from the crowds
- and to spend time teaching his disciples
- it was here that Jesus famously asked his disciples
- ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’
- ‘Son of Man’ was Jesus’ favoured name for himself

Then, as now, people had a variety of ideas about Jesus

- a great prophet of the times had been John the Baptist
- (whom Herod had ordered to be executed)
- some thought Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead
- others though he was a forerunner for the Messiah
- (in the mode of one of Israel’s great prophets, Elijah)
- Still others though that he was a prophet in the mode of Jeremiah
- (another great Old Testament prophet who, like Jesus, prophesied doom for Israel)
- Some might have thought he was one of a long series of prophets before the Messiah

Having heard the great variety of answers, Jesus shifts the focus of his question

- From people in general to the disciples in particular, who do you (disciples) say I am?
- As is often the case, Simon Peter serves as a spokesman for the twelve replying,
- ‘you are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Matthew 16:16) (Christ = Messiah)
- Simon was the first disciple to be called and the first disciple to understand
- In reply, Jesus’ commendation indicates the contrast
- Simon (Peter) is son of Jonah, but Jesus is the ‘Son of the living God’
- Recognising who Jesus truly is the result of a special, divine insight (or ‘revelation’)
- For such knowledge could not have originated in ‘flesh and blood’ (mortal man)

It was not that the disciples never hoped Jesus would be the Messiah (John 1:41-49)

- Indeed they began following Jesus in the hope that he was the Messiah
- Though their understanding of the nature of Jesus’ messiahship
- Was hindered by their own expectations
- But, their time at Caesarea Philippi marks a crucial stage in their growth
- They recognised that Jesus was the Messiah
- But would not appreciate what that really meant, until after his death and resurrection
- Nevertheless, it was such faith in Jesus as the Messiah
- That inaugurated the true Christian community, the beginning of the church
- This community would not be defeated by death ‘The gates of Hades’
- For the strength of Satan and his cohorts
- Could not hold Jesus in the grave
- And will not prevent his people rising from the dead on the last day
- The proclamation of this good news will open the kingdom to many

I THE TRUE NATURE OF JESUS CHRIST

From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

Jesus turned and said to 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 16:21-24)

Once the disciples have recognised that Jesus is the Messiah

- Jesus takes the opportunity to explain what his messiahship means
- He is not a political Messiah who will oust the occupying Roman army
- But a suffering, dying and rising Messiah

It was not yet the time for the wider population to know that Jesus was the Messiah

- For the journey to the cross must not be short-circuited by premature disclosure
- ‘Christ’ or ‘Messiah’ literally mean ‘anointed one’
- in the Jewish mind this was a king of Israel in the line of the great King David
- who would be light and hope for the people of Israel
- and who like David would triumph over Israel’s enemies
- Even for Peter, the depth of his conviction seems to be the very thing
- That made it so difficult for him to hear Jesus talk about suffering and dying

‘From that time on’ (v. 21) marks a clear turning point, as Jesus heads for Jerusalem

- Where his arrival at Jerusalem will be greeted by the Palm Sunday crowd
- Who are probably only vaguely hopeful about his true identity as Messiah
- And have no idea what such messiahship really means
- But for the disciples, the time for symbols and veiled language is largely over
- Jesus reveals that he knows the Father’s will is his sufferings and death

Although this is not the first time that Jesus has alluded to his death (9:15; 10:38; 12:40)

- it is the first time he discusses it openly with his disciples
- the prediction is remarkably detailed – he must go to Jerusalem (killer of prophets)
- and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law
- (collectively, these three groups were the majority of the ruling council, ‘Sanhderin’)
- there he would be killed and rise again on the third day

There is little doubt that the disciples understood what Jesus meant

- otherwise, why would Peter (in an extraordinary outburst to a Rabbi) rebuke him
- “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”
- It is a quite shocking demonstration of arrogance
- To confess that Jesus is the Messiah
- But then speak as if he knows more of God’s will than the Messiah
- The Lord’s rebuke of Peter is a play on words
- Whereas previously he had called Peter the ‘rock’ now he is a ‘stumbling-block’

Earlier in Matthew, in the temptation narrative (4:8-9)

- Satan offered Jesus kingship without suffering
- Now Peter does the same – he believes that Jesus is the Messiah
- But he wants Jesus to be his kind of his Messiah

Here is the old enemy in a new and more dangerous form (the words of a friend)

- Perhaps no temptation is as subtle as the well-meaning words of family or friends
- But Jesus recognises the ultimate source of this further temptation as Satan

Jesus is declared to be uniquely God's Son

- Before his birth (1:21-23)
- In his return from Egypt, where he was hidden from Herod (2:15)
- At his baptism (3:17)
- In the temptations (4:2, 5)
- During exorcisms (8:29)
- And at the moment of his death (27:54)

There are some people who see the death of Jesus as the death of a martyr

- Someone who dies for what they believe in
- There are some people who see the death of Jesus as the death of a hero
- Someone who dies in a noble or good cause
- There are some people who see the death of Jesus as an example
- Someone with good qualities to be admired and imitated by others
- But although there is a sense in which Jesus is martyr, hero and example
- His death is as redeemer, Saviour, ransom, for:

the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many

(Matthew 20:28)

II THE TRUE NATURE OF THE MESSIAH

Instead of being a revolutionary liberator, Jesus will be a suffering Messiah

- But with the first prediction of his impending sufferings and death
- Jesus also gives the first prediction of his resurrection
- Jesus will now show Peter that God's way is the way of the cross
- Not only for Jesus but for those who would follow after him

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

The true nature of Jesus and the true nature of his messiahship are followed

- By the true nature of discipleship

A man condemned to crucifixion was often forced to carry part of his own cross

- A burden and a sign of death
- and yet losing one's life (in the sense of giving it over to discipleship)
- is the way to finding eternal life

At first sight, these verses could appear to be 'a do-gooder's charter' but

- it is discipleship (taking up the cross) that is rewarded and not 'good works' as such
- this demands the disciples' willingness to deny themselves absolutely
- it is a kind of death to self, in the hope that the Kingdom of God will come

In contemporary Christianity, the cross and crucifixion are symbols of the work of Jesus

- and rightly so – but in contemporary Christianity, little thought is given
- to the cross and crucifixion as an image of discipleship
- a faith where we talk about dying and rising with Christ
- but a faith where Jesus does all the dying and we do all the rising – how can that be?

The Apostle Paul points to the cross as the historical event – the death of Jesus

- but explains that the cross is not only a horrid reminder of the death of God's Son
- but an irreplaceable symbol of God's grace
- and a matchless image of the Christian life of discipleship

It is so easy for us to criticise what we might judge as the superficial welcome

- of the first Palm Sunday crowds – contrasting this with the Good Friday crowd
- the crowds had not yet reached the right decision about the identity of Jesus
- 'Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee' was right in so far as it went
- but it was not enough – he is the Christ, Son of the living God
- even the disciples struggled with what his messiahship would mean:
- betrayal, sufferings, crucifixion, death and then, and only then, resurrection life
- but even if we can grasp that Jesus is the Christ
- and that his dying on the cross is essential to his saving work
- is it not the case that we would like his Lordship, his messiahship and our discipleship
- on our terms – what is discipleship on our terms?
- It is when Jesus and his kingdom fit into our plans, rather than our obeying his will

There is a negative dimension: he must deny himself (not my will for my life)

- There is a positive dimension: he must take up his cross (his will for my life)
- There is the practical dimension; following Jesus (putting it into practice)

It is difficult to know what Jesus means by 'the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom'

- Perhaps his transfiguration, perhaps his resurrection
- Perhaps the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and the spread of the kingdom
- I think it might be the resurrection (the victory over the Gates of Hades)
- That is an essential part of the gospel that the Apostles will preach
- And the manifestation of Christ's kingly reign

Although Peter often makes mistakes

- Both in his misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' messiahship
- And his three-fold denial of Jesus, we can learn some important lessons from this

Although Peter misunderstood what it would mean for Jesus to be the Messiah

- And earned a rather sharp rebuke – Jesus does not abandon him but teaches him
- Although Peter denied Jesus three times – Jesus did not abandon him but restored him
- The astonishing grace and gentle restoring power of Jesus should not be missed
- None of us has failed so many times that God can no longer use us

Peter is not a perfect disciple but he is a disciple like from whom we can learn

- He was willing to give up his work and home – to follow Jesus
- He had courage, sensitivity and an openness to God's revelation
- When his courage deserted him – Jesus restored him
- When his spiritual sensitivity was blunted – Jesus taught him
- One of the things that he ultimately developed
- In the transformation from Galilean fisherman to Apostle is consistency
- This consistency meant a willingness to know Christ on his terms (not ours)
- And to live with the shadow of the cross
- (tradition has it that ultimately Peter was crucified
- upside down because he felt himself unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord)

Consistency in our discipleship involves a continual willingness to live with the cross

- taking up our cross to follow Jesus
- is not only what we do on the first day of our Christian lives
- but what we should be doing every day of our Christian lives
- so that every day we adopt God's will for our lives over our own will

To examine what we want in the light of what God wants for us

- is truly the essence of Christian living
- whether in the great decisions of life
- (e.g. education, career, marriage partner, home)
- or in daily living and
- this applies not only to resisting temptation or choosing Christian service
- but also to things where the choice might not be clear cut
- only in that way is our mind trained to think like Jesus

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- II THE TRUE NATURE OF THE MESSIAH
- III THE TRUE NATURE OF A DISCIPLE