

## **Matthew 16:21-28<sup>v vi</sup>**

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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### **<sup>v</sup> About the Gospel: Matthew 16:21-28**

Jesus responds to Peter's confession (16:16) by foretelling his own passion and by teaching on discipleship. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus' death and resurrection are part of God's plan—indicated by the word "must"—in fulfillment of the scriptures (26:54).

The anticipation of suffering and death was totally at odds with what was expected for and of the Messiah. Peter expresses this, once again speaking as the disciples' representative. Matthew makes Peter's response more vivid than Mark did by putting it into direct speech (Mark 8:32). Jesus responds to Peter's rebuke as a continuation of Satan's temptations in the wilderness (4:10). As Peter has been called the rock of foundation for the Church (16:18), so here he is a "stumbling block" (Greek, *skandalon*) because he has his mind set on human goals and priorities.

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There is another side to the promise of 16:17-19. Jesus teaches the disciples that, as suffering is the price of messiahship, so it is also the cost of discipleship. The disciples must “deny themselves”—renounce all human things that keep them from following the example of Jesus. The word “life” (Greek, *psyche*) means also “self.” To save one’s life/self in the world’s terms is to lose it in God’s and vice versa. The disciple must choose again and again between Satan’s offer (4:8-9) and Jesus’ (5:3-12).

## <sup>vi</sup> Reflection and Response

When Paul wrote today’s verses from Romans, he must have paused to reflect on painful memories, recalling wryly their application to his own life. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed,” might have been Jesus’ own message to Paul when he confronted this persecutor with a call to repentance and new mission.

Not that Paul—then Saul—would have considered himself conforming to the world when he sought to wipe out the Church. After all, he was on a holy mission for God, safeguarding the purity of Judaism from the blasphemy of these strange band of enthusiasts. Once again, the scriptures for this summer warn us to beware the dangers of rigidity; we cannot be disciples of the Merciful One without hearts filled with mercy.

But the scriptures warn us, too, against the comfortable path, the easy discipleship that costs us nothing, the “cheap grace” that the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer lambasted in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Against this easy choice stands Jesus himself, his feet turned toward Jerusalem and the cross, his ears attentive to his beloved friend Simon, whom he has just nicknamed Peter, “the Rock,” and whom he has just declared divinely favored with a revelation from God.

We do not know Peter’s exact words, but perhaps we can imagine them from our own temptations. “Not Jerusalem! You will accomplish nothing there except your own death. It’s your responsibility to act prudently, to take care of us, your disciples, and continue the good work that, after all, you have just begun.”

Instead of Peter, Jesus now calls his friend “Satan.” Instead of praising him for a divine revelation, Jesus now declares that Peter’s heart is set on worldly goals, not God’s goals. Not only will Jesus continue to Jerusalem, but all those who want to be his disciples must be ready to die with him—not only in Jerusalem but in every day of their lives.

Peter, like Satan, is tempting Jesus to listen not to God’s voice but his own. Unlike Satan, Peter does not offer Jesus wealth, power and fame. Instead Peter speaks for the temptations that beset most of us—temptations to security, ease and the approval of those we love.

These may be the hardest temptations to conquer. In today’s gospel, whatever Peter’s words, whatever images they evoke in Jesus’ heart, Jesus does not turn aside. And as he walks, he sees us hesitating behind him, uncertain of our own choice. He asks us: “What will your life be worth if you give up its meaning?” What do we answer? Where do we walk?