

Proper 17A 2020 Sermon
Matthew 16:21-28

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."

In last week's Gospel, Jesus asked his disciples whom they thought he was, and Simon answered, "You are the Messiah." Whereupon Jesus commended him, and gave him the name Peter, "rock," telling him, "On this rock I will build my Church."

Today's Gospel reading immediately follows last week's, and Peter, the Rock, has suddenly become "a stumbling block" – Jesus even calls him "Satan"! What happened, that Peter went so quickly from rock to stumbling block?

Peter rightly said that Jesus was the Messiah; but he had the wrong understanding of what it really *meant* to **be** the Messiah.

Today's Gospel begins with Jesus telling 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." This does not – in any way, shape, or form – fit into Peter's understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah – and it is likely that all the other disciples held the same misunderstanding. They believed that the Messiah would be like his ancestor King David, wielding military might, and would overthrow the occupying Roman rulers and restore independence to Israel. So *strongly* does Peter react **against** Jesus saying that he *must* undergo great suffering and be killed that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes his own Master, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." And Jesus wheels around and says 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."

You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

The *human* understanding is of a messiah who comes with military might to overthrow, by force, the occupying Roman rulers. The *divine* understanding of a Messiah – **Jesus**’ understanding – is of a Messiah who *must* undergo great suffering, be killed, and then be raised on the third day.

A **divine** Messiah *undergoes* suffering at the hands of those who oppose him; a **human** Messiah *inflicts* suffering upon those who oppose him.

You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

Peter will not be the *last* follower of Jesus who misunderstands the divine Messiah. Christians down through the centuries, including Christians in our own day, at times maybe even you and I, will continue to identify themselves with what has been called a “muscular” Messiah, who dominates, even kills, his enemies.

I have been listening to an audiobook on the history of Christianity. As many of you know, in the first three centuries of the Christian Church, Christians were, at times, brutally persecuted by certain Roman Emperors. Emperors would sometimes throw Christians to the lions, and the Emperor Nero often lit his garden parties with human torches: the burning bodies of Christians.¹

But all of this imperial persecution of Christians changed when, in the year 312 A.D., two claimants to the imperial throne of Rome engaged in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. A day or two before the battle, one of the claimants, Constantine, was said to have seen a vision of a cross in the sky, along with the words, “In this sign you shall conquer.” The night before the battle, Constantine is said to have had a dream in which he was told that his soldiers should mark their shields with this sign of a cross. Constantine won the battle decisively; and that victory, in the words of historian Paul Davis, “... [paved] the way for Christianity to become the dominant religion for the Roman Empire and ultimately for Europe.”²

A historian of Christianity points out the sea-change in perspective which this appropriating of Christianity by the secular state caused. When you think about it, it is the height of irony that Jesus’ cross, a symbol of powerlessness and willing submission to torture and death at the hands of earthly rulers, became a symbol which an earthly ruler used in support of killing others whom he deemed his political enemies. It was a 180-degree turn.

And Jesus and his cross have *continued* to be used in that way ever since: appropriated by “muscular Christians” as justification for, and encouragement of, violence against their enemies. The word “crusade” comes from the Latin word for cross, *crux*, and the brutality of the Crusades of the 11th, 12th, and 13th Centuries (Crusades waged not only against Muslims but at times against fellow Christians) remains a gruesome stain on the reputation of Christianity down to our time.

The contrast between this *Crusader* use of the cross for killing, and *Jesus'* cross, on which he submitted to *being* killed, could not be more stark.

My friends, Peter's understanding of the Messiah as a "muscular," militant Messiah is still alive and well in certain corners of Christianity today. To these "muscular" Christians, outward signs of power – brandishing firearms, lobbing verbal hand grenades at one's opponents – are equated to being a "strong, committed Christian."

Russell Reno is editor of the religious magazine *First Things*. I bumped into Rusty at various church gatherings when I lived in Nebraska and he was a professor of theology at a college in Omaha; he was still an Episcopalian at the time. In a Twitter post earlier this month, Dr. Reno noted that some WWII vets had visited the White House – and they did not wear masks to avoid transmitting the coronavirus. But rather than being disturbed that one of these vets might be a carrier of the virus and transmit the virus to the President or any of his staff, Rusty applauded them. "[T]he WWII vets did not wear masks," he tweeted. "They're men, not cowards. Masks=enforced cowardice."

Really?

Science has *proven* that my wearing a mask significantly reduces the probability that I might unknowingly infect you if I am an asymptomatic carrier of the virus (and 40% of coronavirus transmissions are by asymptomatic carriers). Is wanting to protect you, and others whom I might meet, cowardice on my part? Is ignoring scientific facts bravery, or Christian faithfulness? And yet, the idea that a "muscular" or "macho" Christian is somehow a more *committed* Christian has been a consistent belief in parts of Christianity since the time of Constantine.

Years ago, one prominent Evangelical pastor, speaking of what qualities he looked for in a President, said, "...when I'm looking for a leader... I want the toughest, meanest, son-of-a-gun I can find!"³ That's what many of the Jews of Jesus' day were looking for in a Messiah; and Peter seems to have been influenced by some of that same belief. To *suffer* and *die*, in the common mindset of the day, not only spelled *failure*, it was weakness and shame.

Jesus' followers wouldn't understand until after his prediction had happened – after Peter, the rock, out of fear had denied his Master 3 times; after the Messiah had been whipped and mocked and spat upon and stripped naked and nailed to a cross and buried – to all appearances, an ignominious, excruciating (from the Latin *crux*, cross), and humiliating end. Peter and his fellow disciples would not understand until after Jesus had risen from the grave 3 days later, as he had foretold, and had appeared to them.

It took all of this before Peter and the other disciples came to realize that their vision of a muscular, militant Messiah was as far from **God's** understanding of a Messiah as could be imagined.

Perhaps St. Paul, who earlier in his life had been a “muscular Jew,” “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus,” (Acts 9:1) perhaps Paul best described the irony of the cross. To him, it was anything **but** a *muscular* symbol. Paul wrote, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world... so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29, NRSV) “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” (2 Corinthians 11:30, NRSV) Paul suffered from a “thorn in the flesh” (we don’t know what kind of ailment it was), and he had asked the Lord three times to take it away from him, but the Lord refused, saying to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” “So,” Paul writes, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9, NRSV)

Power is made perfect in weakness. The cross is not a muscular symbol: it is far **more** than that. It is a symbol of strength and power made perfect in weakness.

Peter could not have understood this before he had experienced it: before he had denied Jesus 3 times, before Jesus had been whipped, stripped, crucified, before Jesus had died, was buried, and rose again.

But *we can* understand it, my friends!

For you and I know the *true* story of the Messiah, the true story of the cross: that Jesus, being abandoned by his disciples, betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, scourged, mocked, spat upon by Roman soldiers, stripped and crucified on a cross for all to see, dying and being buried, was vindicated in **all** of this “great suffering” by God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and by so doing showed where true strength lies.

“You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,” Jesus tells Peter – and us. For God knows that we, too, have our minds set on human things way too much of the time. We, too, can be seduced by human, rather than divine, understandings of strength, and by the lure of a “muscular Christianity.”

Lord, may we not be stumbling blocks to you! Empower us to deny our small, ego selves, take up *our* cross, and follow you.

AMEN

1 <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/great-fire-rome-background/1446/>

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle of the Milvian Bridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Milvian_Bridge)

3 (Dallas Pastor Robert Jeffress,
<https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2016/03/04/exclusive-robert-jeffress-no-christian-has-the-right-to-impose-his-preference-as-a-litmus-test-for-someone-elses-christianity/>)