

“Turning Point” – Mat 16:21-28

Well, the presidential election campaign in the Excited States certainly took a turn this week, didn't it?! It's certainly been an exciting time. I guess with all the hoopla coming from our neighbours, our own politicians are twitching at the gate as well, and perhaps we'll get a chance here in Canada to slip an election in even before theirs (is that perhaps the strategy?)

Whatever happens here at home, I couldn't help but notice some parallels between the events of the past week down south and our two readings from Matthew's gospel – the one last week and the one this week. You may recall that last week's reading was full of proclamation and pronouncement, of recognition and celebration, and it's quickly followed by this week's prediction of impending doom and disaster. The parallel seems so clear to me between that shift and the events of the Democratic National Convention followed by McCain's "out of left field" announcement. Now I must declare that I have never met the honourable Governor of Alaska, and so cannot with any credibility comment on her personality, but I have to tell you she sure brings back memories of some manically-sparkling eyes that heralded sudden jags into the land of Wierdville!

However it turns out, this past week has shown us a very sudden, very significant turning point in world politics, and our reading from Matthew shows another very sudden, very significant turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Recall last week, in the section that immediately precedes this one, we heard Peter make the solid declaration, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." You would think that was cause enough for celebration, for a huge stage event, tens of thousands of cheering people; red, white, and blue plastic confetti blown in the air; stirring music. But no ... strangely enough, after acknowledging that Peter was correct, Jesus bid his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. But then again, after some reflection, perhaps it wasn't so strange after all; not only was the public not ready to hear about a suffering and dying Messiah, neither were the disciples. There was a huge gap between what Jesus understood his being the Messiah meant, and what the disciples thought it meant and our reading deals with these two key questions.

Our reading opens with a hugely important declaration from Matthew. "From that time on...". With these words he identifies and flags for us a clear turning point in Jesus' ministry. Up till now, that ministry has been an exciting adventure, picking up disciples along the way, displaying power in miracles, shaking the tree of the established righteous, teaching and preaching and healing among the enthusiastically supportive crowd. Here, with that one little phrase, "from that time on ..." we see the first tiny little cloud forming over the mountain, the smallest hint to those who are aware that things are radically different now. I'm sure most of you have seen this kind of change. For example, in the blink of an eye, in the uttering of one statement, somehow everything in a relationship instantly changes. Sometimes for the better, more often for the worse. Usually it's a subtle change, even if profound. Those involved would find it hard to describe: the focus has somehow shifted; or perhaps what used to be funny isn't now; or now certain topics are awkwardly avoided. This is that kind of moment. With Peter's declaration that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" everything changed in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. From that moment on it was much more serious, with hints and predictions of impending disaster not far down the road.

Jesus knew what being Messiah meant, and it was time for him to bring his disciples up to speed. He began to tell them what it meant, that he would have to go to Jerusalem, suffer greatly, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Of course, it made no sense to Peter, and to the others, and to people in general. Peter's concept of a Messiah, like everyone else, was of a

kingly figure come to rule over them. The Hebrew word 'messiah' means 'anointed one', implying king-designate, from the coronation ceremony where the oil was poured on the head of the king to be crowned. (The Greek word meaning the same thing is *Christos*, from which we get 'the Christ'.) When Peter and the others thought of Messiah they thought in terms of someone who would usurp the rule of the political leaders, would re-establish the monarchy in Israel and would lead them all into the prosperity and freedom that was their birthright from God. They thought of a powerful figure, one who could zap any opposition, and rise to glorious prominence and power.

So it made no sense to Peter, and to anyone else for that matter, to hear Jesus speak of suffering and death as key parts of his Messianic role. And so Peter did what he so often did best, led with his mouth. Peter took Jesus aside, and tried to tell him to cut out this crazy talk about suffering and death. Can't you see it? This rough, tough fisherman taking this naïve, starry-eyed kid aside and telling him, "look, you've gotta stop thinking and talking this way! We're on a roll here, doing important stuff! God forbid you should throw it all away and let such horrible things happen to you! Oy veh!"

What started as a quiet aside turned into a shouting match. Far from being the naïve, starry-eyed kid, and with his understanding clear of what God's will for him was, Jesus ripped Peter apart. However good Peter's intentions might have been, however much he cared for Jesus and didn't want to see him suffer, Jesus saw his intervention as temptation to stray from the path of God's will, and such temptation could only be inspired by satanic forces of evil. Poor Peter. We can relate to him, can't we? Trying to do what he thought was right, walked into a holy hornets' nest. The message? That Peter didn't properly understand what being the Messiah meant, and hadn't yet caught on how important it all was, especially the part about God's will.

And so Jesus began to teach his disciples what it really meant for him to be the Messiah, in pictures and terms vastly different from what they might have expected. "Deny yourselves. Take up your cross and follow me." Quite the opposite of the rock-star status into which they were growing, with huge and adoring crowds swarming around them offering food, accommodation, and adulation, isn't it? This was a call to self-denial to the 'nth' degree. This was upside-down, inside-out, front-to-back opposite of what they believed so far. So they didn't miss the oddness of this call, Jesus elaborated. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." What's really important here, he asks them. Is it all the fortune in the world? Or is it life? What could a person possibly offer in return for their life? And lest any of them miss how important this all is, Jesus closes with an apocalyptic image of his return, replete with angels in magnificent glory, bringing judgment to all.

The disciples caught on. They heard Jesus' message, and with their own eyes saw his predictions come true. They were present and participating as, following the will of God, Jesus did go to Jerusalem, did suffer terribly, and was killed. The disciples also witnessed that he was raised again on the third day. They came to a clear and accurate understanding of what Jesus being Messiah really meant, and they offered their lives to him, many literally taking up their cross to follow him.

There's a huge note of caution we have to acknowledge here. Jesus' message to his disciples seems clear enough, especially "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." That message was to a particular group of people in a very particular context, and if we are to connect it with ourselves, a different group of people in a very different context, we need to understand the essence of what Jesus was saying.

Few of us would claim that the words uttered by Jesus to his disciples on that day literally mean that we need to pick up a cross and trudge to a crucifixion. Sure, there are some in parts of the world who hang themselves on meat-hooks and even get themselves nailed to a cross in a vain attempt to live out these words in a literal sense – but even they fall short as they are eventually pulled down and treated for their wounds if not for their state of mind.

We need to – and it is appropriate to – understand that we need to hear the sense of what Jesus was saying to us, and apply it to our lives in our contexts to become followers of him. Is it about taking up suffering? St. Anselm (in the 4th Century) thought so, and developed a theology of atonement that is still popular in many quarters today. One consequence of Anselm's theological understanding was that it is good to suffer, because through suffering we are taking up our cross. There are problems with that understanding, not the least of which is that people are all too eager to help others take up their cross by increasing their suffering. Anselm's theology has been used since he presented it not only to justify but to applaud the suffering of slaves, the poor, the oppressed, and even women. You know the kinds of expressions, “there, there, suffering makes you more like Jesus!”

I think if we shift our focus from “take up their cross” to “deny themselves” we might have a more appropriate sense of just to what Jesus was and is calling his disciples. The amplifying question about what will it profit them lends support to this understanding that Jesus is presenting us with the choice of being disciples of ourselves or disciples of him. We are called to turn our attention away from ourselves – and so to where or to whom do we turn our attention? The answer to that comes clearly from everything else that Jesus taught his disciples – with a focus on feeding the poor, clothing the naked, healing the sick, supporting the weak, honouring all people, giving instead of taking, cutting people some slack, considering people more important than the rules. We are called in this turning point to turn outwards, to concentrate on helping others instead of helping ourselves.

These turning points in faith come along from time to time, and it is a joy to both experience and to observe them. This past week we had an opportunity to see such a turning point in the lives of some fine young people – the Youth In Mission group here from Ontario who some of you met last week. They had several turning points, including participating in the breakfast last Sunday, and they mentioned how that experience had impacted them. On Monday they joined with some players from the Street Soccer Team to pack some 300 bags with socks, soap, shampoo and tooth paste. On Tuesday they helped make soup here at the church, and then took it down to Oppenheimer Park to hand out along with those bags, and then played soccer with the Street Soccer Team. They discovered that the people usually objectified as “those street people” were real, live, people ... polite, charming, and grateful. It was a delightful turning point in the faith and lives of those young people, a real example of how losing one's life for Jesus' sake will result in finding life – and life abundant.

This passage is a profound turning point in Matthew's gospel. More importantly it's a turning point in the history of the world as well, marking that moment where Jesus began the movement toward Jerusalem, the cross, and the resurrection. Perhaps it can be a turning point for us as well, marking a moment when we truly understand God's love for us, displayed in his Son, the Messiah, the Christ, and when we begin to truly accept that love, and pour it forth for others as we follow the Messiah, the Son of the living God.