

“Sharp Turns In Life and Faith” – Mat 16:21-28

Particularly with respect to American politics the news lately is full of sudden and surprising events. All of these events are transitional and will have an impact on us in B.C., in Canada, and even in the world at large. There is sadness from some; there is rejoicing from others; and there is even denial in all quarters. Some people claim that the event that is particularly close to them will have no significant effect on how their world unfolds. Others recognize that each of these events represents a major transitional shift. The future is always uncertain, but however things eventually turn out, these past few months have shown us very sudden, very significant turning points in world, national, and regional politics.

Our reading from Matthew shows another very sudden, very significant turning point – this one in the ministry of Jesus. I couldn't help drawing some parallels between current world significant events 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; however, that theme of positivity quickly turned into this week's prediction of impending doom and disaster.

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; 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 knew his being the Messiah meant and what the disciples thought it meant. Our reading today deals with these two key understandings, and the difference between them.

The passage opens with a hugely important declaration from Matthew. “From that time on...”. With these words the gospel author 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, surrounded by adoring and enthusiastically supportive crowds. But here, with that one little phrase, “from that time on ...” we see the first subtle 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 often find it hard to describe in detail: the focus has somehow shifted; 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, such a future 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, he 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, bookish, 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!”

However, what started as a quiet aside quickly turned into a shouting match. Far from being the naïve, starry-eyed kid, and having a clear understanding of what God’s will was for him, 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, he walked directly 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 had been growing, with huge and adoring crowds swarming around them offering food, accommodation, and adulation, isn’t it? Jesus was clear that his followers, in spite of being “the rock upon which he would build his church”, were not rock stars, nor should expect or even look for they look for the kind of fame and acclaim that accrues to such performers. His was a call to self-denial to the ‘nth’ degree. This was a completely upside-down, inside-out, front-to-back opposite of what they experienced so far and so that his close followers 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.” We need to note clearly that 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. To be 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 physical 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, women, and oppressed. You know the kinds of expressions, "there, there, suffering makes you more like Jesus, so we're helping by helping you suffer!"

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 them, and us, with the choice of being disciples of ourselves or disciples of him. We are called to turn our attention away from ourselves – and if away from ourselves then 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. I believe many of us have had experiences in which our eyes and our hearts have been opened, recognizing the joy and blessing that comes from looking and living outward, offering ourselves for the good of others instead of focusing on our own needs and wants.

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 one we also proclaim the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of the living God.