

Sermon, August 21, 2022
Matthew 16:24-28

“The Second Coming”

In this morning’s reading Jesus and his disciples have come to the end of their ministry in Galilee and are preparing to go on to Jerusalem. It is at this point that Jesus delivers the first of four passion predictions telling his disciples that he is soon to suffer at the hands of his enemies, that he will be killed, and that he will be raised up on the third day. I’m sure that they were all stunned by him saying this, and Peter takes Jesus aside and tells him that there is no way this can happen. In a way we can hardly blame Peter for saying this. For centuries the Jews have heard prophecies of a coming Messiah, but the expectation was that the Messiah would vanquish Israel’s enemies and oppressors- not that the Messiah himself would die a shameful death. It didn’t seem to make sense. But Peter’s understanding of what Jesus has said seems to stop with Jesus being killed, not with the statement that he will be raised up after his death.

The idea of the resurrection of the dead had long been debated among the Israelites. Prophecies of such a resurrection could be found as far back as the times of Isaiah and Daniel. But in Jesus’ time the Sadducees did not believe in it, because it was not spoken of in the Torah - but the Pharisees did believe in it. But the prophecy was that the faithful would all rise in the end times - not that the Messiah would rise from the dead. So, again, we can see why Peter would have been baffled by what Jesus had said, and Peter, and the rest of the disciples would not understand until after Jesus’ actual resurrection. As Jesus said, they had their minds set on human things - not divine things.

Jesus then goes on to tell his disciples that if they truly want to be his followers then they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow. I believe that what he means by denying themselves refers back to putting their minds on divine things rather than human, and to live accordingly. He goes on to ask, “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” This, of course, is directed at us as well. But what does it mean? I think it’s about setting priorities. Yes, we all have to be about the business of being human, but it’s not about self- aggrandizement - the acquisition of wealth and fame. It’s about leading a life that mirrors the values of the kingdom of God - a life that is just and virtuous, a life of generosity and humility, a life of peace and harmony.

But what does he mean by taking up one’s cross and following him? Well, to begin with, people will often say regarding a difficulty or a burden they carry as being the cross that they have to bear. That’s not what Jesus meant. That’s more in line with Paul’s thorn in his side.

The cross that Jesus is referring to is not a hardship that has befallen us, but, rather, something that we voluntarily pick up. To follow him means to live a life that is loving, hopeful, merciful, and forgiving, but also realizing that leading such a life can lead to pain and suffering. That is the cross he speaks of.

Our reading ends with a statement concerning the Parousia, i.e., his second coming. It has always been problematic considering the fact that he said that those standing there, meaning his disciples, would not taste death before seeing the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. It is clear that the first generations of the church believed that Jesus was returning soon, within their lifetime. Obviously, this did not happen, at least not in the sense, as he said, with angels in the glory of his Father. So, what are we to make of this?

First, the statement falls under the category of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is writings having to do with prophecies concerning the end times. Other examples would be found in the Book of Daniel, as well as the New Testament Book of Revelation. Such writings tended to arise in times of oppression and persecution and were intended to give the people a sense of hope. This might suggest that Jesus did not actually say this - that it was added by Mark and Matthew who both wrote in times of great persecution. It also contradicts a statement that appears in the 24th chapter of Matthew where Jesus says, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor his Son, but only the Father." And, then, a little further on, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (This is why I get irritated when preachers and other folk claim to know precisely when the time is to come!)

Some scholars have also pointed to the fact that Jesus saying that some of those standing there will not taste death before the Son of Man comes in his kingdom is immediately followed by the story of the transfiguration in which the Son of Man is certainly glorified.

However, I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that instead of Jesus suddenly appearing in the sky, flying on a cloud, that, in a sense, WE are the second coming! What I mean by that is that when the Church truly embodies the values of the kingdom of God, when we promote peace and justice, when we are merciful and forgiving, when we embrace all that Jesus stood for in our hearts, and in the way we live our lives, individually and together, we become the Body of Christ! He returns in us, as we proclaim and reveal to the world the glory of God!

Amen.

Let us pray: O God, we are made glad by the good news of your love for us and all. We thank you for creating us and giving us all that is necessary for life. We thank you for your action in Christ by which our lives are measured, found wanting and renewed. Help us to remember your gifts that we may praise you with lives of joy and service. We thank you, Lord, for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ, and ask that you help us look to him for guidance as we face the challenges of our times.

As always, we pray for those in need of healing in body, mind , and spirit, and remember to you...