

**Matthew 16:13 – 24**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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.

**Matthew 18: 15 – 20**

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if

two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

## Reflection

The Gospel passage set for today in the Revised Common Lectionary is the second of the two which I have just read, found in Matthew Chapter 18. I have chosen, though, to read it alongside the portion from Matthew Chapter 16 because, as ever, it's important to understand the context and not just to treat verses from scripture as if they can be looked at in a vacuum, separate from everything that lies round about.

Chapters 16 to 20 of Matthew's Gospel focus upon that time in Jesus' life and ministry when he is walking towards Jerusalem for the final time. He has set his course, knowing full well that it will end, inevitably, in a confrontation with the religious and political authorities – a conflict which – in worldly terms --- and with great suffering --- Jesus will lose.

Having achieved that high point in his life and ministry when he is transfigured on the mountaintop – his true glory and identity confirmed and dramatically revealed --- that point when Peter---- albeit momentarily and only very partially --- has the special revelation that this Jesus is the Messiah – the one sent from God to redeem Israel ---- Jesus now has to cram in as much teaching as possible --- and to try to break through the blindness and deafness of his disciples --- to prepare them for the devastatingly hard truth that is to come.

So, throughout Chapters 16 to 20 and beyond Jesus repeatedly speaks of his passion and his death – trying desperately to waken the disciples up to the still bewildering depths of the Gospel. This requires shock tactics --- such as when he denounces Peter as Satan for his absolute refusal to accept that Jesus is going to die. Poor Peter goes from hero to zero in a very short time --- but there will be many more difficult pills to swallow in what is to come.

Thank God for Peter --- for he represents every one of us. Every one of us struggles with the bewildering depths of the Gospel – depths which turn everything we know and understand upside down.

## Pause

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Clearing out some books in my study --- as we prepare to downsize after 30 years living in manses --- I came across a little pocket Latin dictionary. For some reason I had written in the flyleaf some Latin numbers; Septem – 7; Octo – 8; Novem – 9 and Decem – 10. As my poor Latin teachers would bear witness, I was no Latin scholar, but I am very grateful for the perseverance of those who got me through a Latin Higher and gave me a foundation in the language which has been of great value.

Today is the first Sunday of September. Eight months of the year are gone and with the passing of August comes that movement from summer into early autumn --- beyond which lies winter. The months race past ever more quickly the older one gets and this year – despite the slowing down effects of lockdown – seems to have been no different in that respect.

As it happens it was on 1<sup>st</sup> September that I opened that little Latin dictionary and I stopped to recognise that whereas September is the ninth month in our calendar – its name means seventh. That, of course, is because in the Roman calendars it was the seventh month, because the year started in March. October, November and December were the eighth, ninth and tenth months respectively. Today, we use the Gregorian Calendar, which was devised by Pope Gregory the Thirteenth and initiated in October 1582 when the date jumped from the 4<sup>th</sup> of October to the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, missing out all days in between. This was because the Julian Calendar, named in honour of Julius Caesar had drifted over the centuries because it didn't take adequate account of what we now call Leap Years. Rather than also rename the months, Pope Gregory stuck with September, October, November and December even though, strictly, they now made no sense, if taken at face value.

If you find that a bit confusing – perplexing --- then you have some small insight into the confusion of Jesus' disciples and their consequent frustration and anger. They had just begun to understand one reality --- that Jesus was the one sent from God – the Messiah who would redeem Israel. That conjured up obvious images of victory over the Roman oppressors; of

freedom from poverty and slavery and the birth of a new dawn of prosperity for all. Yet Jesus is now saying that the destiny of the Messiah is to go to Jerusalem and to die. Jesus has given hope with one hand – only to snatch it away with the other. It makes no sense! Or does it?

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Everything is about context. Once we understand the context of how our calendar has developed – well then, we can see that the apparent nonsense of calling the ninth month September can be understood. It just requires explanation and experience. In the same way, the apparent nonsense of Jesus being the Messiah yet dying on a cross can be understood— but it takes explanation and it takes experience. It takes the courage and the willingness to overcome our anger and our frustration --- to live with it and through it in the hope and the faith that understanding will come.

Just as Jesus first disciples had to endure all the hardship and challenge of seeing the one they loved die an agonizing death; so in this age and in this country, we who love Jesus are having to endure the slow decline of the Church. Surely it makes no sense that God should allow this to happen! The first step toward making sense of it lies in acceptance – the acceptance that the ways of God are not the ways of humankind. Then it requires patience, endurance, perseverance and – above all – faith in the life and death and resurrection of God in Christ – in Jesus -- who despite sometimes contrary appearance --- is the Saviour of the World.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen