

Sermon

'For my sake and for the sake of the Gospel'

30 August 2020, Mt 16.21-28



In our Gospel this morning, which is both tragic and true, Jesus reveals that behind Peter's seemingly innocuous rebuke, there is a deeper and more complex reality at work. For it is not only Peter, but Satan too, at work, undermining, confronting, Jesus. Jesus is forced to confront, and overcome evil, in obedience to the mission that he has received from God. The mission of his decisive victory over evil in his crucifixion. A once for all victory that is anticipated, by our Gospel reading today.

In rebuking Satan, Jesus is calling Peter, along with all of the disciples, to follow him. To turn away from the prince of this world. To turn away from the misery of the world. To turn away from human things, toward the things of God.

To follow Jesus is to fall into line with him. To follow behind him. To deny ourselves, and take up our cross. To follow him, in the way of the cross.

One of the strange, mysterious and striking features of Martin Luther's theology of the cross, is its claim that it is through human suffering that God is reconciling the world to himself. The claim that the once for all event of the reconciliation of the world to God in the Passion of Christ, is one that is open to the world. That the Passion of Christ, is open to world history. That the Passion of Christ is received by the world, in its own suffering.

Says Luther, because in our natural human pride, which is a universal part of being human, we are separated from God. Our minds become set, not on God, but on ourselves. We fall into the original temptation, to want to be God (Gen 3). But the Most high God, the Creator of the world, cannot share his glory his world of creatures (Isa 42.8). God cannot give his praise to an idol. Share his praise with our world of modern, secular, humanity. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And we are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

For Luther, Christian faith see in suffering the strange and mysterious working of God. By which the world is being reconciled to God. It is in suffering that our natural human pride, which we are separated from God, and from our true self, is broken down. It is in suffering where, to our complete surprise we discover our misery being met, by the Joy of the Gospel. God's 'Marvelous Exchange' in Christ. His eternal Son. The Saviour of the world.

For Luther it is the 'theologian of glory' whose search for God has led them to proclaim that he is to be found in reflection on the created order, and human moral activity. And so to regard suffering as a non-sensical intrusion into the world. Says Luther the true theologian will come to regard his suffering as his most precious treasure: for revealed and yet hidden in such suffering, is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves.

For Luther, the revelation of God, and his action in reconciling the world to himself, in this strange and mysterious manner, may be discerned, only by the Christian. God has hidden it away from an unbelieving world, defying every attempt of human reason to master it. Preserving it, as the word, the revelation, **of God**. An offence to the world, it stands in direct contradiction to accepted, worldly standards of wisdom. The world does not expect to find God in 'the place' of human suffering. The world is not inclined to look for God there. And yet, there God is, openly revealed to the world, for anyone to find him, who would humble themselves, and care to seek him there. Not in the 'high places' of philosophical reflection on the created order, nor the moral high ground of moral selection on the human order. But in the one place that God has chosen to reveal himself. In the one place, that God has chosen to be found. The place of the crucifixion of Jesus. The eternal Son of God. Where Luther remained, throughout his life, at the foot of the cross. To worship God there.

Says Luther, the world is driven to despair, losing all confidence in itself, concluding it has been abandoned by God. But God has not abandoned his world. Quite the opposite. Through this strange and mysterious work of God, we are being brought to God. We are being reconciled to God. We are given peace with God.

For this reason, Luther could speak of his 'delicious despair'. At one with God, and on the basis of the relation to God, at one with all who are 'in Christ', who share in a 'marriage with Christ' through his 'Marvellous Exchange', we enter into that reconciliation of the world to God at which Christ's coming into the world is aimed.

At peace, *with God*. Reconciled, *to God*. Justified, *by God*. We are at peace, we are reconciled, we are in just relation, with one another. With all who throughout the world belong to Christ. Safe at last, free at last, ours is a lasting peace, a true reconciliation, a permanent justice. It will outlive every ideology. It will outlive the tempting political ideology, the empty show, of modern secular human society. That is built no longer on the rock of a divine kingdom, but now on the sand of human things. So that, when the storm comes, how great is that fall?

'My kingdom is not of this world' Jesus proclaimed. Before Pilate, the representative of political order everywhere. Beyond the empty show of the whole world of human empires, Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Christ's kingdom, is from above. Christ's kingdom, is the Kingdom of God himself. A kingdom, and a world, without end. A justice, and a peace, without peer.

In the eternal kingdom of God, said Martin Luther, 'The cross alone is our theology'. And suffering, 'in so far as it takes everything away from us, leaves us nothing but God: it cannot take God away from us, and actually brings us closer to God.' And 'living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating.'

'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.