

Suffering & the Messiah

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We love St. Peter because of his humanity, but in today's Gospel we hear how Peter's humanity gets him in hot water with Jesus.

To understand what's going on, it's best that we go back to last week to see how this all transpired before St. Peter, who last week Jesus was calling the rock, and this week He's calling him Satan.

How do you go from hero to zero? Well, if you remember last week, Peter made this miracle profession of faith, that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed one, the Son of the living God.

Upon hearing that, Jesus conferred upon Peter the keys to the kingdom and made him the rock-solid foundation of His church. And then, to show how quickly things can just pivot on a dime, immediately following that, Jesus decides He's going to tell His disciples about His passion, what awaits Him in Jerusalem.

In your Bible, this is the first prediction of the passion. So Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that when He goes to Jerusalem, He's going to suffer, die, and rise again on the third day.

When Peter hears this, you know, like in that great movie, A Few Good Men, Peter can't handle the truth. That's what's going to happen.

That is Jesus' truth. But Peter has another truth about the Messiah.

Because in Peter's mind, the Messiah is not a suffering servant Messiah. The Messiah has to be a conquering hero Messiah.

So Peter takes Jesus aside. Remember, Jesus is the Son of God.

He is God incarnate. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him.

And tells Him, you know, heaven forbid that anything like that should ever happen to You. You need to disabuse Yourself of that idea.

That's not the way things happen. Well, the word for rebuke in Greek means to sternly warn.

So wrap your mind around that. Here's Peter, a human being, sternly warning God in the person of Jesus Christ that He's wrong.

That's a pretty big deal. And so, Jesus then rebukes Peter.

He says, "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking like God. You are thinking like a human being." Maybe that's instructive to us for what Jesus sees in this encounter.

Because think of somebody else. Think of two other people who thought they knew better than God.

Adam and Eve in the garden. Mere human beings thought they knew better than God.

So they ate from the tree. They disobeyed God.

Who tempted them to think that they knew better than God? Satan in the form of a serpent.

And Satan is all about lies and pride. I think here what Jesus is seeing is kind of this archetypal spiritual pride coming out in St. Peter. It's kind of insidious because it doesn't really look like pride. I mean, it is pride because what else can you call it when a mere human being is telling God incarnate that He's wrong.

So, Jesus needs to correct this situation. He needs to nip it in the bud.

To get Peter, the rock foundation of His church, on board to understand His true identity. That Jesus truly is and will be a suffering servant Messiah.

I think it's probably the rest of the way to Jerusalem that Jesus is trying to impart this to Peter. And Peter is not quick on the uptake. Because remember what happens in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus begins to enter into His passion. What does Peter do?

He takes out his sword when the guards come and try to arrest Jesus. He takes out his sword and chops off Malchus' ear.

He's trying to prevent Jesus from being arrested and entering into His passion.

And so, Peter, you know, is having a hard time understanding our Lord's true identity. And how a Messiah can actually be a suffering-servant Messiah.

We probably don't have that kind of problem understanding Jesus as the suffering servant Messiah. But we do at times have a problem with suffering and the Messiah. Our truth about suffering.

Is our truth about suffering always our Lord's truth about suffering? Do we sometimes pretend that we know better?

Almost four decades, you know, in profession and spiritual direction, I hear things like, "Well, I'm suffering, so God must be punishing me." Right?

Well, let's remember that we worship Jesus Christ, who is God. When we look in the Gospels, there are no instances at all of Jesus inflicting pain and suffering on anyone in order to punish them.

And yet we continue to think that when we are suffering, maybe somehow God is punishing me for something when Jesus, whom we worship, never did that.

On the contrary, Jesus heals and Jesus forgives. He doesn't punish with suffering and pain.

Okay. Well, if Jesus isn't punishing me in my suffering, then maybe He's abandoned me in my suffering. You know what St. Teresa of Calcutta says about that? She says, when we suffer, we draw close to Christ, and Christ draws close to us. She says, Jesus draws so close to us in our suffering that He kisses us. That's not abandonment. That's love and consolation.

Well, if I'm not being punished and if I'm not abandoned, well, I certainly don't deserve this suffering that I'm going through. No, you don't. No, you don't. And neither did Jesus.

But how in the world do we think that somehow we should escape all suffering from this life when Jesus did not. And in fact, we are baptized into His suffering.

When we're baptized, we're baptized into the entire life of Jesus. And that life of Jesus and the rhythms of that life are mysteriously reproduced in our life.

The good times, the bad times, and the ugly times, the suffering times. And that's why Jesus in the Gospel says that we have to learn not only to accept suffering in our lives, but to accept it and be able to spiritualize it for a greater good. A good outside of ourselves. That's what redemptive suffering is all about.

That's what offering it up is all about. For maybe our spiritual good, for the good of His church and the good of God's kingdom, and to give greater honor and glory to God.

So for us, no, we don't deserve to suffer. We do because that's how it is.

But suffering can have deep, deep spiritual meaning as Jesus and the saints tell us and show us by their example. So while we don't have a problem with the identity of Jesus as the suffering Messiah, let us consider if we do have a problem with suffering and Jesus and how the two go together. Maybe we need a little attitude adjustment on that. And if we do, those words of St. Paul in that second reading in his letter to the Romans are so beautiful that we want to remember. He says, "Do not conform yourself to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind so that you may come to discern what is God's will, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

And that includes taking up our cross and following Jesus.