

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
30 August 2020

Matthew 16:21-28

I would like to make a connection between the readings for today and the collect for this Sunday. Let me do a little education about what Collects are. Collects are prayer that collect or gather together the theology of the readings assigned for the day. Every collect has four components. The first part is an ASCRIPTION. Ascription means that every collect says something about God. In this case, we say the following: "Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things..." So, the ascription for the collect for today tells us that God is filled with power, he is the author of everything that is, and he is the giver of everything that is good.

The second component of every collect is what is called the petition, and you know it because it is usually preceded by a colon (:.) In this case it asks several things, (a) Give us the love of your name, (b) increase in us true religion, (c) nourish us with all goodness, and, although there is a fourth petition I believe that this fourth petition functions here as the third component of the collect. I believe the real center of the petition for this week is the middle petition, "Increase in us true religion." This is specially true when we compare this phrase with the issue of controversy in the passage of Matthew, as we will see. The petition assumes that there is a distinction between true religion and false religion and I believe this will be the theme for the readings for today.

Every collect has a third component, which is called by some folks an ASPIRATION, and by others an ASPIRATIONAL CLAUSE. This is the reason why we ask what we ask. What we hope to accomplish through the petitions. We often see this clause begin with the words "Because, so that, that, since..., etc.) Why are we asking God to give us an increase of true religion and to nourish us with his goodness? I think we get there by taking the four petition and adding the words "so that" to them. This is a common practice for some with collects that instead of having an aspiration have instead an additional last petition. Following this method, the aspiration for today would sound like this: "So that you can bring forth in us the fruit of good works." So we ask that we may love God's name, may have an increase in true religion in our lives, and be nourished in God's goodness, so that we may produce the fruit of our faith. That is the reason why we ask these things.

The last clause all collects end with is a Trinitarian formula, "Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the power of the Holy Spirit..." We know that a collect is an ancient prayer of the church when it ends with this trinitarian formula. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. You know that a collect is a newer collect when it ends with "In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!" or some variation of this. But, when you see the full formula, it most likely is an ancient collect of the church.

Today in the Gospel of Matthew we find this very interesting passage where Peter, who last week was called Cephas, the rock, the stone on which the whole superstructure of the church would be built one day, the very founder or spiritual inspiration for the post-resurrection Church. last week he is called Cephas. This week Jesus calls him a stumbling

block, a rock that is placed in someone's way to make him trip. He is an object of temptation, an instrument that leads us to be disconnected from true religion that should inspire the heart, and we move into the false religion of convenience, immediate results, progress, and unbridled prosperity.

And, why? Why does Peter go from being the very rock on whom the church will be built to being a stumbling block that gets the name "Satan"? Last week he was a saint today he is Satan. Last week Jesus says, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, because no human words have given you this truth, but my Father in Heaven has given you the ability to realize that I am the Messiah, the Son of God. You truly are blessed, and your name shall be Peter, and on you I will build my church." (My paraphrase.)

This week he is Satan, the very enemy of God, the tempter, the one who opposes God's ways. Why the transition from last week to this week? The transition starts with a conversation Jesus is having with his disciples. Last week he asks them "Who do the people say that I am." They respond, "Someone says you are Elijah, some say you are Moses, some say you are one of the prophets, perhaps Jeremiah." Jesus then asks them, "And, who do you say that I am?" This is one Peter makes that wonderful statement, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

In this week's passage, Jesus advances the conversation. he tells them, "You are absolutely correct. I am the Messiah who was to come, but listen, 'I must go to Jerusalem, and there I must suffer. All of these groups: The Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, the Temple Authorities, the Elders of the people... All of these people will abuse me, humiliate me, and kill me. But I will be raised in a few days and I will come back to life.'" Peter then turns him aside and says, "Please don't say those kinds of things! Just don't say that, Lord. Our ministry is going so well. We have people coming from everywhere. What is this obsession with death? Are you depressed? Do you need a little counseling? Don't say those things in front of the crowds. We have something good going on here. We are on our way of building a Mega-Church. We have people driving 20 miles to come to see us! And it is all because of us, what we are doing to make this wonderful ministry happen. Don't start talking about death and sacrifice. Folks don't like a church that demands anything from them! They don't want a church that demands dying and coming back to life. Why don't we just continue to teach about the history of Israel? Why don't we just continue to preach with great emotion about how they are the chosen people of God and how much God loves them? Let us concentrate on God's love, and let us not talk so much about death!" (Someone help me, I am paraphrasing and I can't stop!)

In this sense, Peter acts very much like the tempter in the desert after Jesus' baptism. If you remember these temptations from Satan in the desert are all to do with Jesus's Divinity. Satan wants him to refuse accepting the limitations of his humanity. Satan wants Jesus to renounce his full humanity and to resort to extraordinary measures to avoid suffering those things which we as humans suffer: Our desire for power and control, our need to toil for our daily bread (food), our desire to worship someone (or something) greater than ourselves, our fear of suffering and death, etc. Jesus must avoid all these normal human

emotions and needs and stake a claim on his Divinity. If Jesus is willing to pay the price, and worship Satan, he can avoid future suffering and want.

In a way, this is what Peter is saying right now. Peter is telling Jesus, “We are having so much fun with this divinity thing (miracles, healings, resurrections...) we love the fact that you are the Messiah who is coming into the world, why are we then talking about betrayal, suffering, and dying on a cross? Let’s not go there!” In a way, this is an appeal for Jesus to emphasize and take full hold of his Divinity and walk away from the cumbersome, painful, sometimes terrifying features of his humanity.

Remember that it was Peter who up in the mount of transfiguration said to Jesus, “It feels good to be here, Lord. Let’s build three tents, one for Elijah, one for Moses, and one for us. Let us remain up here on the mountaintop because down in the valley there is suffering and pain, down in the valley there is misunderstanding and greed, down in the valley there is hatred and political sedition, down in the valley there is conflict between people and people groups, down in the valley life is confusing and filled with suffering and death. Let us stay up here on this mountain top. Let us stay in full communion with God and the saints of ages past. Let us stay and enjoy our mountain top experience. Let us not go back down there.”

This has been Peter’s tendency all along. He is very willing to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, what he is not willing to recognize is that Jesus is also fully human, and as the fully-human-fully-Divine son of God, he has a mission to accomplish and this mission from God will take him to the cross if necessary. Jesus must do the will of his Father!

We too sometimes want to escape the gritty, pain-filled, messy mission God is giving us as the Church of his Son. Many of us want to stay up in our comfortable Ivory Towers, and just go from Bible study to Bible study, reflecting about the goodness of the Lord, but all of that reflection remains nebulous theological constructs similar to the work of the monks in the Middle Ages, trying to theologize and discover in groups how many angels fit at the tip of a clothes’ pin. It is Theology void of human action and interaction. It is Orthodoxy without Orthopraxis. And, when the Collect prays today for “True Religion,” it is connected with the idea of producing fruits worthy of God’s will for our lives. This Collect and this passage from Matthew invite us to an active faith that is engaged in the world, that is constantly interacting with those who are in pain and those who suffer. This is a faith that is constantly unfolding God’s kingdom on earth, even when this means living with the disenfranchised, the poor and neglected, and those who find themselves outside of the mainstream for whatever reason.

True religion then, according to the Collect and Matthew, requires sacrifice, action, and commitment. It requires that we go above and beyond ourselves to heal a wounded world, or rather, to bring a wounded world to Christ for healing. We are called to take care of those who are in need, to be Christ’s hands and feet in this desolate planet we call “earth.” We must be God’s mind and God’s words of comfort and love.

So, for those who want easy religion, without sacrifice; for those who want a church that doesn’t demand anything, doesn’t expect anything, doesn’t require anything, doesn’t hold us accountable for anything; a church that no longer believes in sin, a church that no

longer believes in the need for transformation, a church that is very comfortable with the status quo; for those around the world who believe this is the church they want, Matthew today reminds them that true religion is a matter of the heart, and it is a matter of commitment, and it is a matter of engagement, and it is a matter of love.

This week, let us pray for all the victims of Hurricane Laura, but let us go beyond that, let us also commit ourselves to take care of those who are in need in our own communities, our own towns, and our neighbors. Let us ask God to give us a love for true religion, religion of the heart, religion fully involved in the life of the people who places in our lives. May he continue to bless you. Amen!