

For the third time this month, and the second Sunday in a row, Peter the Apostle is showcased in the gospel reading. Last Sunday it was Peter as the first of the disciples to proclaim the Church’s basic creed regarding Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). Realizing that the Father had singled out Peter as spokesperson and eventual leader of the community following his death and resurrection, Jesus in response proclaims Simon to be “Peter” the “rock” upon which he will rest the community of faith. Today, in the verses that continue last Sunday’s gospel, Jesus now calls Peter “Satan” as part of a sharp rebuke to Peter’s objection to Jesus’ prediction of his passion, death and resurrection. Simultaneously Jesus unequivocally proclaims what “messiahship” as applied to him means and what following him as disciples is to mean for Peter and the other disciples, and for us, too: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24).

While occupying his unique place in the church, once again, Peter represents each of us. Peter is experiencing a “crisis of faith” in his understanding and following of Jesus. For Peter, the other disciples, as well as the Jewish people of the time, the hope that God would raise up a messiah was very real. For some, the messiah would be a powerful political and military leader restoring Israel to the prestige and power it had under kings David and Solomon. For others, the messiah would be a religious leader renewing and reforming the religious establishment (in our terms the institutional church). No doubt Peter could foresee himself being named “chancellor” or “prime minister” of a worldly kingdom, or in the hierarchy of the church “cardinal” or “monsignor”. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Peter was feeling a little, or more than a little, “duped” by God at this moment in regard to his vision of faith and discipleship.

Like Peter, we too, have our particular image and expectations of Jesus, and what following him entails. For some, Jesus is “hero”, “friend” (or as I heard one person proclaim once, “my buddy”); an admirable role model, but also someone who doesn’t demand much. For others, Jesus is the fearsome Judge, the Lord of Glory before whose hand we should all be trembling since he is waiting to “trample out the vintage where

the grapes of wrath are stored” so they can gloat over being saved while “unbelievers” are condemned.

Jesus rebuke to Peter, and to any of our false images and expectations in his regard, is like the experience of a parent holding a squirming and crying child while putting some stinging antiseptic on a cut. The parent’s action causes pain for the child, not because the parent wants to hurt the child, but because the parent fears infection or even greater harm. The parent desires only good for the child.

So too, God. God desires for us new life, the life that comes only through conforming ourselves to his will (as we heard Jeremiah do at the end of the first reading, and Jesus in the gospel). This always entails “pain.” When we hear Jesus’ words about “cross bearing” we tend, like Peter, to only focus on the “painful” aspects of suffering and death. We need to remember that the fullness of life Jesus offers, and has won for us, always leads through suffering and death to new life. This is why we embrace the pain of faith, of dying to self, losing our life, self-giving for the sake of others—to seek, and hopefully obtain, the only thing that is lasting, fullness of life, eternal life, in God through Jesus. “Cross bearing” is not primarily physical, though for some it does come to that, but primarily a matter of the heart, a freely willed handing over of the inherent will to “control” in my life in response to God’s love in my life in the model of Jesus.

In rebuking Peter Jesus does two things. First he calls him “Satan.” Not Satan in our usual understanding of the term as the devil. Peter is not evil. “Satan” as understood and employed at the time of Jesus could be any adversary or temptation which tries to entice someone away from a particular goal or path as Peter was doing. It could also, and was used, to describe the powers of evil arrayed against God. Secondly, and most importantly, Jesus tells Peter to “get behind me.” Like a military leader leading his troop into battle, Jesus invites Peter to “get behind him” to follow in his shadow, his protective wake, and following him, shares in his victory. Today, Jesus invites us to a like following as St. Paul urges us to: “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (Rm. 12:1-2).