

Scripture Speaks: Get Behind Me

GAYLE SOMERS

In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus called Peter "the rock." Today, He calls him "Satan." What happened?

Gospel (Read Mt 16:21-27)

In the verses preceding today's passage, Jesus and Peter had a remarkable exchange. Peter identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God; Jesus announced that God had revealed this truth to him. On that basis, Jesus changed his name and made him head of the Church He was to build. He made a promise to preserve that Church, giving us some confidence that He wasn't making a terrible mistake. However, in today's reading, that confidence gets tested.

We find that "Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly...be killed and...be raised." Peter, the newly appointed Rock of the Church, is horrified. The English translation of the Greek doesn't give the full force of Peter's instant and violent reaction to Jesus' prediction of the Cross. In Greek, the verb translated as "took aside" is better rendered "took possession." The scene was likely one in which Peter pulled Jesus forcibly to himself, by His tunic, and literally stepped ahead of Him, blocking the road to Jerusalem. We have seen Peter's impetuosity before in this Gospel, and we will see it again. These verses demonstrate it graphically. Peter listened to Jesus only long enough to hear "suffer greatly" and "be killed." However, when Jesus spoke these words, they described actions that were leading up to **something else**: the Resurrection. Peter never got that far. The thought of Jesus undergoing that kind of cruelty was too much for him: "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to You!"

We all understand this reaction, because it is so human. Still, it disturbs us in the man upon whom Jesus intends to build His Church. Is this guy reliable? If our confidence in him starts to wobble, Jesus' next words might strike it to its foundation: "Get behind Me, Satan." What's going on here?

We must understand why Jesus harshly calls Peter by this dreaded name. Clearly, the intention of Peter here is radically different from the temptation of Jesus by Satan, God's enemy. As we know from the forty days in the wilderness, Satan consciously and intentionally wanted to subvert God's plan to save the world through the humility and obedience of His flesh-and-blood Son. Earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel, we see Satan "taking Jesus" aside, first to the pinnacle of the Temple (Mt 4:5), then to "a very high mountain" (Mt 4:8). His goal was always to tempt Jesus to repudiate the path God had ordained for Him: in His human weakness, through His own self-denial, He would rise

victorious over both death and the devil. After the third temptation, Jesus says to Satan, “Be gone!” (Mt 4:10), foreshadowing the final removal of his presence and power among men.

Notice the difference in Jesus’ response to Peter: “Get behind Me, Satan.” This is a difference that makes all the difference. Jesus here is referring to Peter as Satan in a metaphorical way, as an “adversary” (the literal meaning of “satan”) who, because he is thinking as a man does (we never believe suffering is God’s plan), temporarily becomes an obstacle to Jesus. The command to “get behind Me” suggests that Peter’s problem was that he wanted to get ahead of Jesus. Perhaps he thought that his appointment as head of the Church meant he could lead even Jesus! The sharp rebuke returns him to reality. Jesus leads; the disciples, even (and especially) Peter, follow. Does this lapse nullify Peter’s role in the Church? Not at all. If it had, surely Jesus would have issued a retraction. It does demonstrate, however, that Peter still had much to learn about thinking “as God does.” He and the other apostles would have to live through the Passion in order to understand how different God’s way is from the way of man. In order to prepare them, Jesus speaks about the mystery of God’s way.

“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel will save it.” This is the lesson the apostles and all followers of Jesus would have to learn. When we cling tightly to life and comfort in this world, we risk losing out on the real life God desires to give us. Peter, out of misguided love, proposed exactly that. Jesus had to correct him, out of true love, and call him back to allegiance to God’s way. As the apostles would soon learn, the path to glory, for Jesus and for us, cannot avoid the Cross. However, suffering is never the end of the story for those who are behind Jesus.

Possible response: Lord Jesus, I need Your help to really believe that when I lose my life, I find it.

First Reading (Read Jer 20:7-9)

We ought to know something about the prophet, Jeremiah, if we are to understand this reading and why it is read before our Gospel. Here is a helpful description:

“During Holy Week, the Church enters into a period devoted mainly to the commemoration of our Lord’s blessed Passion. She has appointed the prophet Jeremiah to be read in this time, because in his message he is the most ardent preacher of penance to his people, a fearless and scathing denouncer of their sin. In his life, he is the most faithful picture of the suffering Christ that exists in the Old Testament.” (*Pathways in Scripture*, Damasus Winzen, pg 235)

Jeremiah was called by God to warn Judah that punishment for their covenant faithlessness was inescapable. As a result of his unpopular preaching, he underwent severe suffering. In today’s reading, he brazenly cries out to the LORD that he had been “duped” into being a prophet, although he admits, “I let myself be duped.” Here he is not describing deception or dishonesty by God; rather, he believes that when God called him as prophet, there was not exactly full disclosure about how much his obedience to that call would cost him personally. Jeremiah became an outcast among His people for

telling them what God wanted them to know: “All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me.” As he continues to pour out his soul, he admits that he considered keeping God’s words to himself, saving himself from the suffering he was sure to incur: “But then it comes like fire in my burning heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary of holding it in, I cannot endure it.” Trying to avoid a prophet’s suffering would cause Jeremiah even **more** suffering. In this, he foreshadows Jesus, particularly in the heat of His response to Peter’s proposed change of God’s plan. A fire burned in His heart to do the mission He was sent to do. He could not “endure” any deviation, even when suggested by a friend who loved Him.

Possible response: Heavenly Father, I desire the courage of Jeremiah to follow Your call to me no matter the cost.

Psalm (Read Ps 63:2-6, 8-9)

The psalmist describes his desire for God as a restless “thirst,” a longing that penetrates both his “flesh” and “soul.” His most relevant observation, however, is that God’s kindness “is a greater good than life.” Jesus says precisely that in the Gospel, as did Jeremiah in his agonized soul’s outpouring. Both men understood, as the psalmist did, that life outside of doing God’s will is not real life. Jeremiah knew he would explode if he didn’t obey God’s call. Jesus knew He would fail in His work if He listened to Peter’s voice instead of God’s. The psalmist expresses this knowledge in the poetry of his prayer: “My soul clings fast to You; Your right hand upholds me.” Even though the psalmist admits that longing for God in this life can make a man painfully uncomfortable, leaving him feel “like the earth, parched, lifeless, and without water,” still he gazes toward God in His sanctuary “to see Your power and Your glory.” Together with Jeremiah, Jesus, and the psalmist, we can focus our hearts in single-minded obedience to God, no matter the cost, in the words of our responsorial: “**My soul is thirsting for You, O LORD, my God.**”

Possible response: The psalm is, itself, a response to our other readings. Read it again to prayerfully make it your own.

Second Reading (Read Rom 12:1-2)

St. Paul summarizes all the readings for us in the exhortation of today’s epistle. He translates into words we can understand the action we should take as a result of what we have read: “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” Jeremiah, the psalmist, and Jesus were willing to do this in their obedience, even though it led to suffering. In the Gospel, Peter was an example of one who had not yet begun in earnest to resist being conformed to man’s way of thinking. Eventually, of course, Peter would be “transformed by the renewal of [his] mind,” able to discern “what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” We should never underestimate how much our minds are in need of this renewal! Let us listen carefully to St. Paul’s “urging,” and let us never forget that this surrendering of ourselves to God comes entirely “by the mercies of God.” It is the loss of self that, mercifully, leads to true life.

Possible response: Lord Jesus, my impulse for self-preservation and avoidance of suffering is very strong. Please help me renew my mind so that I choose to offer, not withhold, myself in Your service.



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