

Peter's Predicament.

A dramatization of Matthew 16:13-23.

The fresh afternoon air filled Peter's lungs deeply before he exhaled in a sigh of contentment. *The satisfaction of vindication.* Oh how good it felt to finally have the Master approve of his position among the other brothers. Not that he'd ever questioned it, of course, but it was good to at least have everything clarified and out in the open now. For months they'd been quietly talking behind his back. He wasn't worried—he'd just concluded that they needed to comfort each other in light of the obvious: he was clearly Rabbi's favourite.

The writing was on the wall, after all. He was the only one among them who would willingly step out with courage—except maybe James and John, but they usually got rebuked for their stupidity, and rightly so. It's not just courage that leaders need, you see, but wisdom, and when the moment came, it was not they but Simon son of Jonah who had proved his more mature perception.

You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Peter reflected on the moment. He had delivered the line well too, as he'd practiced.

Sure, maybe he had had his doubts—nothing compared to Thomas mind you—but he'd known that Jesus was the Messiah for a while now. With the healings, the new Torah, and the precise selection of twelve students, it was obvious that Jesus was starting a revolution movement styled off the stories of the forefathers. And to think that, for all those years, all the innumerable sons of Israel, all the great prophets and mighty kings of old, Jesus had chosen *Peter* to rule his kingdom on his behalf. I mean, only one of Jacob's children can be Joseph, right? And a good David needs a better... or, a *similar* Jonathan. It just all seemed right.

"The *rock* ... build his church on *me*," Peter whispered softly to himself as Jesus and the other disciples walked on ahead. "The gates of Hades will *never* overpower ...". He shook his head in bewilderment at the prospect. "The keys to the kingdom of heaven will belong to *me* ...". These words felt good.

"Peter!" Jesus' call arrested him from the depths of his thoughts; by the tone of Jesus' voice, it sounded like he'd called Peter's name several times before he had noticed.

"Yes, *my* master, what is it?" Peter replied slowly and with affectation, smiling as he joined the group of disciples.

"I need to tell you all something very important." Jesus' eyes did not meet any of theirs, but were fixed at a point on the ground. An aura of seriousness had fallen over him.

"Of course, Lord. I'm... *we're* eager to listen."

Jesus continued staring at the ground, silence following. In order to quench the awkwardness of the moment, Peter tapped James on the arm and nodded towards the bag of raisins he was carrying. James got the message of Peter's raised eyebrows and slight tilt of head and passed the bag to him. Just as Peter started to eat, Jesus looked up and spoke.

"I'm going to be crucified by the Romans and ..."

Immediately Peter spat out his raisin with a splutter, cutting off Jesus mid-sentence.

"Peter? Are you o..."

Peter laughed, loudly and awkwardly in an attempt to distract from the fact that he'd spat his raisin quite close to Jesus' foot.

“Ha! Oh Master... Ha... oh, I’m sorry ...”. As he continued laughing, he leant his head on James’ shoulder while trying to compose himself. With a frown and a look of distaste, James stepped aside a little in order to distance himself.

“Ha! ... Oh, don’t mind... it’s just ... ah ...”, Peter continued.

“Yes?” Jesus’ composure had not changed, but it was evident that he was going to wait for Peter to regain himself before he continued.

“Oh, don’t worry Master,” Peter said as he loosely waived his free hand in the air. “It’s just, I thought I heard you say that *you* were going to be crucified by the Romans! Ha!” Peter rubbed his brow as he shook his head, chuckling to himself all the while.

“Anyway, don’t mind me,” he continued. “You were saying that you’re going to crucify the Romans? Yes. Yes, this is great. Go on,” he nodded enthusiastically.

“No, Peter, *I am* going to be crucified by the Romans and be ...”

“Ha!” Peter cut him off again, slapping James on the shoulder as he laughed. “It’s funny, hey James? ... Can you believe this guy?”

“I think he’s being serious, Peter,” James replied quietly and quickly before staring at the ground, evidently feeling uncomfortable about being drawn into the situation.

“Oh please. It’s just a joke James. I mean, look at him, all serious and that. You’d make a good zealot Jesus, really.” Peter’s chuckling, however, awkwardly abated as he met the unchanged gaze of Jesus. Scanning to his left and right, Peter could see that the other disciples were confused.

“Looks like they need me to clear things up again,” Peter muttered to himself as he took a deep breath. “Ok, ok. Master, if I may? Let me help you with this.”

Jesus nodded slightly and opened out his hand, palm raised, in a gesture towards the space in front of him.

“Obviously humour and sarcasm is a little hard for you all to grasp,” Peter said to the group with a raised voice as he moved into the center of their circle. He quickly turned and leant towards Jesus. “They struggle with the parables, you know,” he muttered quietly before turning to continue his speech.

“What our Rabbi means is that the time is coming, friends. For too long, our people have suffered under the filth of Rome, burdened by their violence and defiled by the Gentile pigs they send to patrol our streets. But Adonai has heard our prayers! He has not been silent to our petitions. His vengeance is coming and our enemies will experience the cruelty they have brought upon us!”

Peter expected more of a response from the others, but their bodies were frozen and their faces set in frowns of confusion; only their eyes moved as they looked at Peter, then Jesus, and then back again.

“The time has come,” Peter sighed as he breathed out, eyes closed, and with that same smile of satisfaction returning. “And I love it. ... *I love it!* Rabbi, you will fulfill all our hopes.”

“Peter, I think you should ...” Jesus started before he was interrupted again.

“Crucifying Romans ... it’s so fitting Rabbi! You’re just so ... so *scriptural*.”

“Peter, please ...”

“I mean, think about it: the evil plans that our enemies have devised for us will fall upon *them!* *They* will die on their own crosses! Ah ... it’s just so right, so ... *just*. It’s what David would do, no? No ... it’s what Adonai *will do*.”

“Get behind me, Sata...”

“And just think about it brothers! Not even the gates of Hades will stop us! And we will rule! And the Church will be built upon ... *what?*” Peter stopped and turned abruptly to be caught in Jesus’ direct gaze. “What did you call ... *me?*”

Reflections on the Passage (Matt 16:13-23)

It's not always an easy day at the apostolic office, is it? One minute you're the rock on which the church is to be built, the enterprise that not even Hades can overthrow; the next minute, you're the prince of Hades!

In what follows, I do not intend on providing an exegesis of the passage, but simply to draw out some points of interest regarding spiritual perception, inspiration, hermeneutics, and cruciformity.

Spiritual Perception

By the time you get to the end of the passage, you might have forgotten that it began with Peter getting something very right... well, in a way. He did, after all, correctly state that Jesus—whose identity was something of an enigma—was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the king of Israel. Indeed, Jesus affirmed that the Father had revealed (or, if you will, 'apocalypsed', from ἀποκαλύπτω) that to Peter. This was not just an inference that Peter had logically deduced from outward appearances (the "flesh and blood revelation" as it were—compare how Samuel assessed the sons of Jesse when he was looking for the next king [see 1 Sam 16:1-13; cf. 9:2]). But by the time you finish the passage, something is obviously amiss. How could Peter be right, and yet *very* wrong, so as to receive one of Jesus' most pointed rebukes?

Well, simply put, Peter was a human. As a human, he intuitively processed reality through the infinitely complex web of his past and present experiences and the cumulative evaluations made from them. Like all of us, Peter existed in a vast network of relations and influences, and was molded by numerous cultural, religious, social, and psychological factors. And as we all pass through life, we constantly craft an intelligible narrative of meaning for ourselves by interpreting the data of the present moment according to what we already know.

Here's what I'm getting at: while Peter was accurately perceiving that Jesus was the Christ, he was also simultaneously interpreting that perception according to his presuppositions about what the Christ would be like. And in that regard, Peter was still *very* wrong.

One of the beautiful things about this passage is how, just after the climactic moment in which the identity of Jesus is finally and clearly stated, Jesus moves immediately to speak of his coming Passion. The Messianic vocation and identity, according to Jesus, finds its *telos* at the cross. This, however, was entirely bewildering to Peter. There could not have been a more twisted reversal, a more inverted image, than a *crucified Messiah*. The cognitive dissonance that Peter experienced rose to such an extent that he couldn't take it any longer. Pulling Jesus aside, he resolved the issue as bluntly and directly as he could: "No, Lord! This will never happen to you!" (v. 22).

In a way, it's easy to sympathize with Peter. He's not without warrant after all. Much (maybe even most) of his understanding of life would have been shaped via engagement with the Hebrew Scriptures, whether that was through reading, memorization, or by participation in the rich liturgical life of early Judaism year after year. Chances are that if we lived in the same context, we would likely have the same perspective and hopes of the coming Messiah as Peter did. Part of this hope longed for a recapitulation of the successes that David's reign had seen, in defeating Israel's

enemies, gaining independence over the land, and realizing the prophetic vision of Israel's global supremacy.

There was just one enormous obstacle to that: Rome.

The violence, injustice and oppression that came with Roman rule surely made the Scriptures particularly potent and meaningful to the Jews during Peter's lifetime. Stories of exile, subjugation and affliction, whether in national history or in the Psalmist's individual cry for vindication from enemies, would have resonated powerfully with ordinary Israelites living under Roman occupation. And the weight of their yearning was concentrated in the crucible of hope in the coming Messiah, through whom God would stretch out his mighty, saving arm and destroy Israel's enemies once and for all.

Would violence be necessary? One need not explore too far into the narratives of Joshua, Judges or Kings to find an answer. Or, if you'd like to get a sense of which scriptures might have 'spoken to' Peter as he formed his Messianic expectations, read Psalms 2; 18:34-50; 21; 101:5-8; 137; 109:1-15; 140:9-11. Indeed, it was likely that the military Messiah, the victorious Messiah, the violent Messiah—dare I add, the terrorist Messiah—seemed to be much more needed in order to bring salvation at Peter's time than a *crucified* one.

Yet all of this, Jesus shockingly says, is to embrace the perspective of *Satan*. This, he adds, is simultaneously to be thinking from a human-centric perspective that is antithetical to the truly philanthropic perspective of a cruciform God (v. 23). As John Behr has often commented, a Satan is anyone who separates Christ from his cross.

Such is the curious phenomena of spiritual perception, confined, as it cannot *not* be, to the human, who, while perceiving true revelation, always immediately interprets it according to their presuppositions and unique spiritual capacities.

Inspiration

This episode provides a good picture or narrative example of how to think about the Old Testament (the "Scriptures") as they relate to the "God revealed through the Cross" (to quote Gregory of Nyssa). We have seen how people can perceive something true of God, yet then interpret and express it in such a way that proves to be antithetical to the core of the revelation. Another related phenomenon occurs in the intriguing episode of John 11:45-53. There, some of the religious leaders opposed to Jesus were becoming concerned about his rising popularity. Their response is described in the following manner:

The chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and were saying, "What are we going to do since this man is doing many signs? If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You're not considering that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people rather than the whole nation perish." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the

nation, and not for the nation only, but also to unite the scattered children of God. So from that day on they plotted to kill him.

Ironic, right? Remarkably, Caiaphas is said to have “prophesied” in that moment. Here we get another perspective on the relationship between divine revelation and human perception and expression. For through the *one* set of words, *both* Caiaphas and the Spirit were speaking, yet *both were meaning different things*. Caiaphas’ intentions are clear: the death of Jesus will save the nation; the Spirit’s intentions are also clear: the death of Jesus will save the nation!

This mysterious phenomenon can help us to understand why the Old Testament Scriptures seem to contain so many ideas and perspectives that are antithetical to the message of Christ and the “God revealed through the cross.” Because they were humans, all those who had a part to play in the progressive composition of the Scriptures couldn’t *not* act according to their humanity. That is, they couldn’t *not* interpret and express their perceptions of God according to their preconceived notions of what a god would be like.

Yet this does not mean that God was not at work in this process, nor that the Spirit was not ‘breathing’ through their words. For through the same words, both the author/redactor and the Spirit speak. Sometimes the former can speak antithetically of God as he truly is, but the latter always speaks of Christ. Where the former speaks of a Messianic king violently annihilating his enemies, the latter speaks of Christ’s love conquering the evil within us enemies through the Way of the cross—the way of forgiveness, grace, repentance and restoration; the way of death to our false, old self in Adam and of resurrection life to our true self in Christ.

Hermeneutics

In light of the passage in Matthew 16 and what we have discussed so far, one can infer that there is a real danger of making very serious errors when it comes to scriptural interpretation. And the weight of this problem always increases the closer one gets toward the more ‘central’ truths; and of particular relevance is interpreting what God is like.

The New Testament is emphatically clear that God is revealed through Christ, particularly through the narrative of Jesus’ coming, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension for our salvation (see John 1:1-4, 14-18; 10:30, 38; 12:45; 14:4-11; 1 John 1:1-3; 3:16; 4:8-10; 2 Cor 3:18-4:6; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3). The cruciform Christ is the image of God.

Now, symbolically speaking, Satan can function as the exact opposite of that image. That is, Satan images selfishness, violence, unrighteous anger, intoxication with one’s own glory, hatefulness, impatience, lovelessness, and pride.

This means that any image or depiction or articulation or imagination of God that is *not the image of a cruciform Christ* is an image that is imperfect, incomplete, partly distorted and therefore one that partly incorporates ‘Satanic’ attributes. By way of analogy, imagine that Christ is the true light (cf. 2 Cor 4:4-6) shining upon the moon, which functions as our canvas of God—it’s just that we don’t always have the canvas positioned to reflect *all* the light, and we are left with less than a full moon, with

darkness filling the gaps, as it were. That darkness is the Satan-like images and attributes we project onto the face of God. Or, to put it numerically, an image of God that is only 90% Christlike is 10% unChristlike; and if we describe Satan as representing that which is antithetical to Christ, then our understanding of God ends up being contaminated with Satan-like attributes.

Thus, no person who encounters God (whether that be immediately, or in the Scriptures) is free from the risk of interpreting God incorrectly. And ancient authors and redactors of Scripture are equally as prone to the risk of expressing their views of God in a way that is antithetical to what God is actually like. That is, they could present God in a Satanic manner, in a way antithetical to the cruciform Christ. And this, again, is all because our humanness is inseparably intrinsic to the act of perceiving, interpreting and then expressing revelation.

Now, does all of this seem a little harsh? I'd encourage you to read the passage again. Peter was looking *Jesus* in the eyes and was perceiving divine revelation from the Father, yet his interpretation was *very* wrong. "Messiah? Yes. A *crucified* Messiah? Hell no."

Therefore, we cannot be surprised to find Satan-looking pictures of Yahweh in the Scriptures. And we can neither blame the ancient authors for that any more than we can blame God. Of course we'd all prefer it to be clearer and to not have such a high risk of misinterpretation; but such could only occur in a world without humans.

Sadly, the same dangerous potential for misinterpretation is crouching at the door of every reader of the Scriptures. And the result is something we're all too familiar with: interpretations of God that are, to put it bluntly, Satanic; a God who kills unfairly, a God who vehemently snaps with impatient rage, a God who's wrath knows no limits, a God who's glory is magnified as he tortures, a God who's pleasure is found in getting a release from the fury pent up inside his divine heart by sacrificing mortals, and a God who, because he never gets over his delight in this, perpetuates it eternally simply because he can do whatever he wants... and he *does* want it.

This episode in Matthew 16 illustrates an important clash of hermeneutical approaches: that of Peter and of Jesus. Both are right when they affirm that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. But both interpreted what that meant, and their interpretations were both fuelled by the Scriptures. Peter, a good, faithful, solid, biblical, scriptural exegete—passionate about expository preaching, the literal meaning of the text, and not shying away from the hard messages of judgment and justice—knows, just *knows*, that the Messiah will wield the sword of Yahweh's wrath, will dash the Romans to pieces like clay pots, will have their blood cleanse the streets of Jerusalem like a propitiatory sacrifice, and will violently liberate Israel in a triumph of divine strength so that they can become the global power holders.

This, however, is what it looks like to view things *Satanically*, to be focused on *human concerns*. Jesus, on the other hand, a good, faithful, solid, biblical, scriptural exegete—passionate about expository preaching, the *Christian* meaning of the text, and not shying away from the hard messages of judgment and justice—knows that the way to save the world from its bondage to those Satanic lies is through sacrificial love. He knows that the cross is the Way of forgiveness, the means of divine victory, the death of death, violence and self-centeredness, and the power that Hades cannot

overcome. And He intends that the Way of the cross would be the defining feature of his church.

Cruciformity

It is no surprise then—but it is oh so fitting—to find the passage immediately followed by Jesus’ central call:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life?”

It’s easy to imagine the sting of Jesus’ words, “what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world,” in Peter’s heart as he stood vulnerably in the *krisis* of cognitive dissonance and sharp rebuke.

But let this passage be a warning to us all. For the one who rightly knows that Jesus is the Christ can still interpret him as a Satanic king. And not just interpret, but *want* him to be a Satanic king. The scary warning of this passage is that you can be *Peter*, the rock on which the church will be built, and yet be so focused on human concerns that *your* mission is Satanic. And when the power of kenotic love assaults the gates of selfish Hades, threatening to tear down all the prospects of personal gain that can be enjoyed within, you could be on the wrong side of those Gates.

Such a person, for whom Satanic attributes have contaminated their perspective of God, will inevitably be to some extent a disciple of *that* Master. Such persons are then likely to believe that a less-than-entirely-cruciform approach to life and ministry qualifies as faithfulness. And because self-deception is the magic of Hades, this is often accompanied by all the more certainty and zeal.

Let us therefore heed the warning and examine whether we believe in a crucified Messiah, whether we have a cruciform God, whether we understand that the path of discipleship is taking up one’s own cross. Let us examine whether our desires to serve Christ are really just fueled by a desire to gain from (a) Christ in order to exult ourselves or satisfy our own egos. Let us examine whether everything—*everything*—that our churches do are done according to the Way of the cross—of cruciform, gentle, gracious, restorative love—lest they be outposts of Hades instead of manifestations of the Kingdom of God.

And let us ask ourselves whether, deep down, we even *want* it Christ’s Way.

Notes:

Firstly, this is by no means a definitive way of articulating the relationship between Christ and the Old Testament scriptures. For that, see John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, The Formation of Christian Theology v. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 1-70, or idem, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, N.Y: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press,

2006), 21-72. For an extended reflection on the nature of Christian theology as the ongoing exercise of articulating the mystery of the revelation of God in Christ, see David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022). For an exegetical explanation of how the cruciform Christ reveals a cruciform God, see Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2009), 1-39.

Secondly, the contrast between certain Messianic portraits drawn out in this discussion (i.e. a violent vs. a cruciform Messiah) does not represent the entire Messianic profile that can be derived from the Old Testament. Take, for example, the Suffering Servant songs of Isaiah, or all the Psalms that speak of affliction followed by vindication for God's chosen servant/s. Yet the contrast explored in this discussion does nonetheless appear useful for reflecting on the Gospel narratives and considering how unexpected the Passion was as the fulfillment of the Scriptures.