

Predictions of the Lord's Death and Resurrection

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“And Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.’” ~ *Matthew* 20:18-19

As we approach our commemoration of the Lord's last supper, His death and His resurrection it may be useful to try to put ourselves in the disciples' position as they themselves approached these events. The just-quoted verse was, after all, the third time the Lord had said things like this. And there were two more such occasions in *Matthew*, not to mention the same or similar readings in *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*.

It's pretty clear from all these incidents that the disciples had no real understanding of what the Lord was talking about when He predicted His crucifixion. Yes, of course they knew He meant that He would be killed, and so on the first occasion when He told them (*Matt* 16:21), Peter, in shock, protested, saying it would NOT happen – which as you know prompted a strong rebuke by the Lord. The second time He predicted it in *Matthew* we find that “they were exceedingly sorrowful” (*Matt* 17:22-23), but this, too, indicates their failure to understand what He meant by His resurrection. And one clear implication of all this is that they surely didn't understand the nature of their own resurrection or the spiritual life – as we'll see in a few minutes.

The third time the Lord predicted His crucifixion James and John came right away with their mother asking special favors in the resurrection, and the fourth was the occasion at the end of a series of teachings on the Mount of Olives, shortly before He went to Jerusalem for the Last Supper. From that moment on hardly an incident is mentioned that doesn't contain some reference to His looming betrayal, death, burial or resurrection until finally, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He plainly states, “Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners” (*Matt*. 26:45). And even then the disciples resisted, and one of them drew his sword and cut off the high priest's servant's ear! – which of course drew another rebuke from the Lord who immediately replied that this betrayal was *necessary* to fulfill the Scriptures.

So just imagine, if you can, being among those disciples. You have followed the Lord for three years, seen Him do incredible miracles, heard Him teach and preach His gospel of love and forgiveness, sat stunned as He exposed the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, and now you're watching helplessly as He speaks of His death by torture, and some kind of mysterious resurrection. Remember, you're not a scholar, you're a simple fisherman. You've seen it all, but now you just can't believe what's happening.

Now jump to the present. What's the parallel in our lives today? What's the spiritual significance of all this in our walk with the Lord?

We're all disciples, but what does that mean? The Writings tell us the obvious, that it means all who follow the Lord, that is, all who *have* the love and faith He teaches. But then they go fur-

ther, and tell us that it's not only about people, *per se*, it's about the love and faith IN people, or as we read, "the goods of love and the truths of faith" *themselves* that are from the Lord with us (AC 9942:12). And then they go further in noting the distinction between a disciple and an apostle: the former being those who are *being instructed* by the Lord and the latter being those who *having been instructed, teach* these things (AR 79:2). So again, in the more abstract or inwardly personal sense, the disciples represent those good loves and true ideas we are LEARNING from the Lord. But they are simple goods and truths, still very much aligned with our experience of the physical world. And guess what! – the scribes and Pharisees and rulers of the Jews are also in us, representing the corrupt, selfish and worldly perspectives that drag us down and cause us to question everything the Lord stands for.

In addition let's be clear that none of us really knows the Lord Himself in any complete way, we only know how He appears to *us*, that is, what *we* think of Him and how *we* feel about Him.

So how do we relate to His predictions of His own death? At first we think, "Oh, wow! He can't really mean it!" And then we are sorrowful. The third time we don't even respond, and on the fourth occasion the Lord simply *reminds us*, saying "*You know* that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered to be crucified" (Matt. 26:2). What is this sequence all about? What's going on *within us* that's represented here?

Well, the first incident features Peter, questioning, in fact *rejecting* what the Lord has said. And we know that Peter in particular represents faith, but as is typical when he acts alone, it is *faith alone*, without the commitment of the will and a fully engaged life. This faith is unstable at best and often prone to doubt. So as we consider the events leading up to Easter we may have some doubts. On one hand we know a lot about the Lord and we really do believe in Him. On the other hand when we read His Word, and especially the Writings for the New Church, it is not unusual for us to question what we read and wonder if, for example, the teachings and illustrations don't contain some fundamental mistakes. Perhaps they suffer from the limitations of a certain culture, age or the science of the day, which all seem very different now.... In any case, we know what we LIKE about the teachings, but the Peter in us can be a little too quick to reject the parts we don't like.

One of these is the part about self-sacrifice. The Lord said He was going to be betrayed, mocked and suffer a horrible, painful death on the cross. Naturally Peter would have been upset to hear this, but do you think it might have struck a little too close to home for *him* as well? Remember, when it came to pass Peter actually denied *three times* that he had even known the Lord. So it appears that the whole idea fill him with fear for his OWN life.

More importantly today, if we take it seriously does the prediction of suffering and death rankle the sensibilities of the Peter *within us*? Does it feel personally threatening? Maybe it should! We all have pretty comfortable lives: we enjoy the things of this world and really we don't lack for much. Even in sickness or injury we have confidence in medical science and we manage pretty well. We do not like to think that we should ever have to suffer.

On the spiritual side our faith is also strong – or so we think until someone asks us about it or challenges us in some way to defend it. Then it can be surprising how quickly the situation starts to feel threatening. *Can* we explain it? *Can* we defend it? Are we going to make ourselves and our faith look foolish? What if the challenger becomes antagonistic towards us or makes fun of

us for this important part of our lives? What if all this makes us feel uncomfortable or even ends up costing us a friendship? Isn't this a lot like Peter's reaction to the Lord's predictions of persecution, betrayal, suffering and death? But when he reacted what did the Lord then say?

“Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (*Matt.* 16:23).

These are tough words, and still the Lord doesn't let up. He goes on to say, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up *his* cross, and follow Me” (v. 24).

Talk about threatening! But we have to keep reading! The next sentence qualifies everything, as He said, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, *but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it*” (v. 25). This is *good* news, but still it's a bit mysterious and hard to picture. So the second time He predicted His crucifixion the disciples were, we read, “exceedingly sorrowful.”

And again we can ask, were they sorrowful for *Him*, or were they sorrowful for themselves? How would *we* have felt if we had been there? How do we feel about all this today? Are we not also sorrowful when we think about losing the life that has become so comfortable to us – both naturally and spiritually? What painful experiences will we have to endure to fulfill the Lord's words? What losses will we have to suffer? What will the real cost of our discipleship be?

We know the teachings. We have to lay down our lives for His sake and for our neighbors. We have to stop thinking about what we want and think instead about what we can do for others. We have to learn to let go of our sense of entitlement, our sense of control, and even our own understanding when the Lord teaches us something new. We have to be prepared to DO the hard work of reading, reflection, self-examination and practicing charity even when it means giving up something else we'd really rather have or do. Thinking about this can make us sorrowful. And so we might try a bargaining approach with the Lord: “OK, I'll do those things if You'll do something for me!”

Essentially that's what happened following the third instance of the Lord's prediction in *Matthew* 20:18-19. The disciples, James and John, resigned to the idea of the crucifixion and realizing He was serious about the resurrection, came with their mother and asked to be given special favors in the next life – to sit, one on His right and the other on His left in heaven, and to rule with Him. James and John represent charity and good works, and their mother represents the affection for these things. But again the Lord answers, “That is not Mine to give. YOU have to do the work, and you have to come to it *from love itself* and not to get some favor in return.” So He went on to say, “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave” (*Matt.* 20:26-27).

Sound familiar? Haven't we all prayed to the Lord at one time or another saying, “Lord, if you will just make [so and so] happen I will really love You! I will really work for You!” But we have to realize that the work comes first, and the loves characteristic of the new life will follow.

So finally we come to the fourth and fifth predictions when the plot to kill the Lord was well under way. Here we are in the 26th chapter of *Matthew*, where we read about a woman anointing the Lord's head with costly, fragrant oil, about Judas' deal with the chief priests, and about the Last Supper. By now the inevitable has been accepted and the only real question is how the dis-

ciples are going to deal with it. Note the anointing of the Lord's body for burial. Oil represents the good of love, and the woman who anoints Him represents the affection we have for His goodness and truth (the body goodness and the head truth). Can we accept these essential spiritual qualities for what they are, treat them with sacrificial respect, and so honor them for their own sake? Judas couldn't. He represents our selfish loves that still want to be in control. Peter couldn't. He still represents faith alone, still insecure for lack of full commitment. In fact it's worth noticing that when the Lord was betrayed and taken away from the garden of Gethsemane "*all* the disciples forsook Him and fled" (*Matt.* 26:56).

But the good news was soon to be revealed. And surely the most remarkable thing about the Lord's resurrection for the disciples was that He, knowing very well that they had all abandoned Him, never ever faltered in His love for them, appeared to them frequently to comfort them, and continued to teach and encourage them, saying,

"These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

"Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was *necessary* for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. *And you are witnesses of these things*" (Luke 24:46-48).

Not only were the disciples witnesses in a visual sense, but they were witnesses in a profoundly *visceral* sense in that they were now, finally, understanding and fully experiencing the life-saving, everlasting love and wisdom that the Lord had been offering them from the beginning, but which they had been too fearful and pre-occupied to appreciate until then.

And so it is, or will be, for us when we finish going through all our states of anger and resistance, sorrow and bargaining and finally come to understand and accept that just as the Lord Himself had to suffer temptations, persecutions and ultimately His death on the cross, so we will have to face our own particular temptations and persecutions, *and lay down our self-centered, naturally-focused lives for His sake*. But when we *do*, that is, when we submit to this inevitable truth we will find that a whole new world opens up for us – a world of blessing, a world of peace, confidence and incredible fulfillment, a world of repentance and forgiveness of sins, free of all the mixed motives and confusion that characterized the lives of the disciples before the resurrection. For in that day, and in all the days that follow into eternal life we will know for certain that the Lord is always with us, that He will never leave us, and that He is providing everything we really need no matter what sort of grief we have to face in order to receive it.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 16:21-18
 Isaiah 55: selections
 Apocalypse Explained #864:5-6