

Historic Commentary



(13th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 16:21-28 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 16](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): Peter was examining the issue by human and earthly reasoning. He thought it disgraceful to Jesus as something unworthy of him. Jesus responded sharply, in effect saying, "My suffering is not an unseemly matter. You are making this judgment with a carnal mind. If you had listened to my teachings in a godly way, tearing yourself away from carnal understanding, you would know that this of all things most becomes me. You seem to suppose that to suffer is unworthy of me. But I say to you that for me not to suffer is of the devil's mind." So he repressed Peter's alarm by contrary arguments. Remember that John, accounting it unworthy of Christ to be baptized by him, was persuaded by Christ to baptize him, saying, "Let it be so now." So we find Peter as well, forbidding Christ to wash his feet. He is met by the words, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." Here too Jesus restrained him by the mention of the opposite, and by the severity of the reproof he repressed his fear of suffering.

[Origen](#): What he intended when he forbade them to publicly declare him Christ is clarified in part by "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples how he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders" and the following thoughts. At the right time and in the right way, he proclaimed to those who knew that Jesus was Christ, Son of the living God (the Father had revealed this to them), that rather than believing in Jesus Christ already crucified, they should believe in Jesus Christ soon to be crucified. So also, instead of believing in Jesus Christ already risen from the dead, they should believe in "Jesus Christ soon to be raised from the dead."

“Having put off from himself the principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in the cross.” If anyone is ashamed of the cross of Christ, he is ashamed of the agency by which these powers were defeated. The one who both believes and is assured of these things should, more appropriately, glory in the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Through that cross, when Christ was crucified, the principalities (among them, I think, was also the prince of this world) were publicly humiliated and paraded before the eyes of the believing world.

Chrysostom: Therefore, the rest being troubled and in perplexity, Peter again in his ardor alone ventures to discuss these things. And he does not discuss them openly but only when he had taken him aside. Having separated himself from the rest of the disciples, he says, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” What is happening here? The very one who had obtained a revelation, who had been blessed, has now so soon fallen away, so as now to fear the Passion of the Lord, and thereby his faith has been overthrown. It is remarkable that Peter, who had not yet been fully instructed in the course of revelation, should come up with these responses. The larger picture had not yet been revealed to Peter, and he was confused and overwhelmed. Peter had learned that Christ is the Son of God. But he had not learned of the mystery of the cross and the resurrection. It was as yet not manifested to him. It remained hidden. Do you see how correct Jesus was in forbidding them not to declare his identity publicly? For if it so confounded the disciples, who were being made aware of it, who knows what the response of others might have been. This is why he rebuked Peter and called him Satan: to signify that he is coming to his future suffering voluntarily.

Chrysostom: When did he teach this? When Peter said, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” And when Peter was told, “Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus did not merely rebuke Peter. He was willing to teach him more fully of the benefit of his Passion and about the exceeding confusion in what Peter had said. So he responds in effect: “Your word to me is that this shall never happen to me, but my word to you is ‘Not only is this hurtful to you, and destructive, to hinder me and be displeased at my Passion.’ But more so it will be impossible for you even to be saved, unless you yourself are continually prepared for death.” So, lest anyone should imagine that his suffering was unworthy of him, he teaches them what great gain will come from it. This applies not only to his former afflictions but also to those yet to come. Later he will teach in John’s Gospel that

“unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” So he now begins discussing more fully the outworkings of the future, not only with respect to his own suffering and death but with theirs as well. Unwillingness to die is grievous, but to be ready for death is good and of great profit. Jesus makes this clear by what follows, but for the present he works it out on one side only. Note that he does not say, “You must suffer whether you will it or not.” Rather, he says, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” This is as if to say: “I force no one, I compel no one, but each one I make lord of his own choice. So I say, ‘If anyone will.’ ”

Then, because he had said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,” Jesus makes a strict distinction between salvation and destruction. This was to prevent anyone from imagining the one destruction and the other salvation to be all the same thing in the last instance. The distance is infinite between destruction and salvation. Then he makes this inference once for all to establish these points: “For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” Do you see how the wrongful preservation of life amounts to destruction and is worse than all destruction, as being even past remedy from the want of anything more to redeem it?

Origen: But what shall a person give in exchange for his life, would seem, if spoken in answer to a query, to indicate a person who trades his life; a person who, after sin, has given up his substance in order that his property might feed the poor. He would in that way receive salvation. Yet, in a positive light, I think this indicates that there is nothing in a person that he can give in trade for his life that will buy off death. God, however, has ransomed us all with the priceless blood of Jesus so that “we are bought with a price,” “having been purchased not with perishable things like silver and gold but with the priceless blood of the spotless, flawless Lamb,”

Cyril of Alexandria: Since the disciples had not yet received power from on high, it was perhaps not unnatural that they should fall occasionally into human weaknesses and, thinking something of this sort, say, “How shall someone deny himself? Or how can someone, by losing his own life, save it?” ... Therefore, to lead them away from reasonings of this sort and, so to speak, forge courage anew within them, communicating to them a longing for the glory to come, he says, “There are some standing here,” hinting at Peter and the sons of Zebedee; for these were taken up with him at the transfiguration, which

Christ calls “the kingdom,” as demonstrating the ineffability of [his] authority and the immutable nature of [his] kinship with the Father. And in this [saying] he also hints at the importance and the fearfulness of his second coming, showing this coming to be a prelude and, as it were, a confirmation of that. For he will come “in the glory of God, the Father,” not in the humble condition that is commensurate with us.

Chrysostom: Do you see how the glory of the Father and of the Son is all one glory? But if the glory is one, it is quite evident that the substance also is one. For if in one substance there be a difference of glory (“for there is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory”; although the substance is one), how may the substance of those differ in which the glory is one? For he did not say, “In glory such as the Father’s,” whereby someone might suppose again some variation between the glory of the Father and the Son. Rather, he implies the entire perfection of the one God: “In that same glory, he will come,” for it to be deemed one and the same.

“Why are you afraid, Peter,” so he speaks, “as you hear of death? Then you will see me in the glory of the Father. If I am in glory, so are you all. Your interests are no way limited to the present life. Another sort of condition will take you up, a better one.” Nevertheless, when he had spoken of the good things to come, he did not neglect to speak also of the fearful things to come. He spoke of the judgment seat, and the inexorable account, and the inflexible sentence and the judgment that cannot be deceived. Thus Christ’s discourse was not intended only to make people feel dismal, but it was tempered with good hope...He reminded not only the sinners of punishment but also them that have done well of rewards and crowns.

Hilary of Poitiers: The Lord teaches that both deeds and words, and speech and action, equally furnish the faith of our hope. For it might seem that he had imposed a grievous burden upon human infirmity; namely that, when people had begun to have a sense of life by experiencing it, they should let go its enjoyment which is gratifying to their bodies. He taught that they should deny themselves for the sake of themselves—that is, they should not wish to be that which they had once begun to be. These things which are held close are accompanied by the enticements of gratifying joy, but they may lead to a wavering and uncertain hope. Therefore it was necessary by the authority of a real and manifest example that he teach them of the loss of present things and place these in the context of

future gains. All of this might seem contrary to the power and perception of current judgment. After he had warned of the cross to be borne and the soul to be ruined and the eternity of life to be exchanged for the loss of the world, he turned toward his disciples and said that some of them would not taste death until they beheld the Son of man in the glory of his own kingdom. Moreover, Jesus himself tasted death and showed the faithful already a taste of death. And so deeds

John Calvin: Having given a proof of his future glory, Christ reminds his disciples of what he must suffer, that they also may be prepared to bear the cross; for the time was at hand when they must enter into the contest, to which he knew them to be altogether unequal, if they had not been fortified by fresh courage. And first of all, it was necessary to inform them that Christ must commence his reign, not with gaudy display, not with the magnificence of riches, not with the loud applause of the world, but with an ignominious death. But nothing was harder than to rise superior to such an offense; particularly if we consider the opinion which they firmly entertained respecting their Master; for they imagined that he would procure for them earthly happiness. This unfounded expectation held them in suspense, and they eagerly looked forward to the hour when Christ would suddenly reveal the glory of his reign. So far were they from having ever adverted to the ignominy of the cross, that they considered it to be utterly unsuitable that he should be placed in any circumstances from which he did not receive honor. To them it was a distressing occurrence that he should be rejected by the elders and the scribes, who held the government of the Church; and hence we may readily conclude that this admonition was highly necessary. But as the bare mention of the cross must, of necessity, have occasioned heavy distress to their weak minds, he presently heals the wound by saying, that on the third day he will rise again from the dead. And certainly, as there is nothing to be seen in the cross but the weakness of the flesh, till we come to his resurrection, in which the power of the Spirit shines brightly, our faith will find no encouragement or support. In like manner, all ministers of the Word, who desire that their preaching may be profitable, ought to be exceedingly careful that the glory of his resurrection should be always exhibited by them in connection with the ignominy of his death.

But we naturally wonder why Christ refuses to accept as witnesses the Apostles, whom he had already appointed to that office; for why were they sent but to be the heralds of that redemption which depended on the coming of Christ? The answer is not difficult, if we keep in mind the explanations which I have given on this subject: first, that they were not

appointed teachers for the purpose of bearing full and certain testimony to Christ, but only to procure disciples for their Master; that is, to induce those who were too much the victims of sloth to become teachable and attentive; and; secondly, that their commission was temporary, for it ended when Christ himself began to preach. As the time of his death was now at hand, and as they were not yet fully prepared to testify their faith, but, on the contrary, were so weak in faith, that their confession of it would have exposed them to ridicule, the Lord enjoins them to remain silent till others shall have acknowledged him to be the conqueror of death, and till he shall have endued them with increased firmness.

Matthew 16:22. And Peter, taking him aside, began to rebuke him.

It is a proof of the excessive zeal of Peter, that he reproves his Master; though it would appear that the respect he entertained for him was his reason for taking him aside, because he did not venture to reprove him in presence of others. Still, it was highly presumptuous in Peter to advise our Lord to spare himself, as if he had been deficient in prudence or self-command. But so completely are men hurried on and driven headlong by inconsiderate zeal, that they do not hesitate to pass judgment on God himself, according to their own fancy. Peter views it as absurd, that the Son of God, who was to be the Redeemer of the nation, should be crucified by the elders, and that he who was the Author of life should be condemned to die. He therefore endeavors to restrain Christ from exposing himself to death. The reasoning is plausible; but we ought without hesitation to yield greater deference to the opinion of Christ than to the zeal of Peter, whatever excuse he may plead.

And here we learn what estimation in the sight of God belongs to what are called good intentions. So deeply is pride rooted in the hearts of men, that they think wrong is done them, and complain, if God does not comply with every thing that they consider to be right. With what obstinacy do we see the Papists boasting of their devotions! But while they applaud themselves in this daring manner, God not only rejects what they believe to be worthy of the highest praise, but even pronounces a severe censure on its folly and wickedness. Certainly, if the feeling and judgment of the flesh be admitted, Peter's intention was pious, or at least it looked well. And yet Christ could not have conveyed his censure in harsher or more disdainful language. Tell me, what is the meaning of that stern reply? How comes it that he who so mildly on all occasions guarded against breaking even a bruised reed, (Isaiah 42:3,) thunders so dismally against a chosen disciple? The reason is obvious, that in the person of one man he intended to restrain all from gratifying their

own passions. Though the lusts of the flesh, as they resemble wild beasts, are difficult to be restrained, yet there is no beast more furious than the wisdom of the flesh. It is on this account that Christ reproves it so sharply, and bruises it, as it were, with an iron hammer, to teach us that it is only from the word of God that we ought to be wise.

Thou art an offense to me; for thou relishest not those things which are of God, but those which are of men.

We must attend to this as the reason assigned by our Lord for sending Peter away from him. Peter was an offense to Christ, so long as he opposed his calling; for, when Peter attempted to stop the course of his Master, it was not owing to him that he did not deprive himself and all mankind of eternal salvation. This single word, therefore, shows with what care we ought to avoid every thing that withdraws us from obedience to God. And Christ opens up the original source of the whole evil, when he says that Peter relishes those things which are of men. Lest we and our intentions should be sent away by our heavenly Judge to the devil, let us learn not to be too much attached to our own views, but submissively to embrace whatever the Lord approves.

If any man will come after me.

These words are used for the express purpose of refuting the false views of Peter presenting himself to everyone as an example of self-denial and of patience, he first shows that it was necessary for him to endure what Peter reckoned to be inconsistent with his character, and next invites every member of his body to imitate him. The words must be explained in this manner: "If any man would be my disciple, let him follow me by denying himself and taking up his cross, or, let him conform himself to my example." The meaning is, that none can be reckoned to be the disciples of Christ unless they are true imitators of him, and are willing to pursue the same course. He lays down a brief rule for our imitation, in order to make us acquainted with the chief points in which he wishes us to resemble him. It consists of two parts, self-denial and a voluntary bearing of the cross. Let him deny himself. This self-denial is very extensive, and implies that we ought to give up our natural inclinations, and part with all the affections of the flesh, and thus give our consent to be reduced to nothing, provided that God lives and reigns in us. We know with what blind love men naturally regard themselves, how much they are devoted to themselves, how highly they estimate themselves. But if we desire to enter into the school of Christ, we must begin with that folly to which Paul (1 Corinthians 3:18) exhorts us,

becoming fools, that we may be wise; and next we must control and subdue all our affections.

And let him take up his cross.

He lays down this injunction, because, though there are common miseries to which the life of men is indiscriminately subjected, yet as God trains his people in a peculiar manner, in order that they may be conformed to the image of his Son, we need not wonder that this rule is strictly addressed to them. It may be added that, though God lays both on good and bad men the burden of the cross, yet unless they willingly bend their shoulders to it, they are not said to bear the cross; for a wild and refractory horse cannot be said to admit his rider, though he carries him. The patience of the saints, therefore, consists in bearing willingly the cross which has been laid on them.

And then will he render to every one according to his actions.

The reward of works has been treated by me as fully as was necessary under another passage. It amounts to this: When a reward is promised to good works, their merit is not contrasted with the justification which is freely bestowed on us through faith; nor is it pointed out as the cause of our salvation, but is only held out to excite believers to aim at doing what is right, by assuring them that their labor will not be lost. There is a perfect agreement, therefore, between these two statements, that we are justified freely, (Romans 3:24,) because we are received into God's favor without any merit; and yet that God, of his own good pleasure, bestows on our works a reward which we did not deserve.

Vs 28. Verily, I say to you.

As the disciples might still hesitate and inquire when that day would be, our Lord animates them by the immediate assurance, that he will presently give them a proof of his future glory. We know the truth of the common proverb, that to one who is in expectation even speed looks like delay; but never does it hold more true, than when we are told to wait for our salvation till the coming of Christ. To support his disciples in the meantime, our Lord holds out to them, for confirmation, an intermediate period; as much as to say, "If it seem too long to wait for the day of my coming, I will provide against this in good time; for before you come to die, you will see with your eyes that kingdom of God, of which I bid you entertain a confident hope." This is the natural import of the words; for the notion adopted by some, that they were intended to apply to John, is ridiculous.

Coming in his kingdom.

By the coming of the kingdom of God we are to understand the manifestation of heavenly glory, which Christ began to make at his resurrection, and which he afterwards made more fully by sending the Holy Spirit, and by the performance of miracles; for by those beginnings he gave his people a taste of the newness of the heavenly life, when they perceived, by certain and undoubted proofs, that he was sitting at the right hand of the Father.