

## **Trails and Silhouettes of Divine Glory**

### **Matthew 16:21-28**

By

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With Jesus addressing his disciples to reveal his true identity in the light of their own lived experiences with him, an address that culminates with God's revelation in the Confession of Peter, Jesus begins the Road to the Passion (Matthew 16:13-20:30). Knowing, perhaps, that the call to follow him may not be an easy undertaking for the disciples to come to terms with, Jesus refutes his disciples to reveal his identity, in the light of the prevailing opinion outside the ranks of Christian discipleship. He challenges his disciples, instead, to make of their own experiences of failure, doubt, and vulnerability in their call a recipe for Christian discipleship, hence a clue to the realm of divine glory. As Jesus sets himself to face Jerusalem, it is not by accident that he begins to speak so plainly about his suffering and death (Matthew 16: 21-28), that he begins to speak so openly about the real implications and consequences of Christian discipleship, that he begins to speak directly about the cost of discipleship and about the cross of shame and humiliation that would become the cross of glory. Today's homily is fundamentally placed within the context of the great narrative, underlining Jesus' Road to the Passion. The present story inspires us to see God's glory as hidden in the dust road towards Jerusalem, to contemplate and understand Jesus's road towards Jerusalem behind the *Trails and Silhouettes of Divine Glory*. In his journey, Jesus embraces both trail and silhouette, because a trail is an uneven and bumping trajectory, while silhouette remains an invisible image. Jesus embraces his journey as a trail because as he begins his journey towards Golgotha, he also inaugurates his journey towards the realm of divine glory. God's glory is hidden in the silhouettes of suffering and shame, because, the trail of suffering, that Jesus begins, makes it impossible for the rest of us to see the hidden glory in the dusty road of shame, humiliation, and agony as Jesus trails on. The most salient significance of today's gospel is the well-known reality about the cost of Christian discipleship, the very reality that discipleship is costly, that there is no Glory without Golgotha, hence without the cross. Without the cross, glory is no glory, is only a symbol of victory and power intended to conquer, humiliate, and subjugate.

In today's gospel, glory is no glory without the underlying reality of the cross. This conclusion dramatically overturns and betrays Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and dashes the disciples' hopes and expectations to nothing. It betrays Peter's own confession and dashes the disciples' hopes, for how can a Messiah so helplessly lead himself to die on the cross of shame? Indeed, Jesus proved his messianism in the feeding of the multitude, in the rescuing of his disciples in the rough sea, as he conceded to the Canaanite woman's plea to save her daughter. So how can this Messiah choose to die instead? The concept of a weak Messiah who may die on a cross betrays the Messianic expectation within the corridors of power of the Jewish religious order and political affiliations. It is hard to reconcile that Jesus is the Messiah, yes; but one that will suffer and be killed, with the expectation of a people in agony longing for a leader who would deliver them from their suffering. Nothing could have shocked and puzzled the sensibilities of a people than for its long awaited leader to go directly to the place where he would be wounded, tortured and killed. It betrays Peter's honesty and longing, who as one of those who saw in the Messiah a leader who would reassure the hopes and expectations of the people of Israel is to lead himself to calvary. Peter is puzzled, in one occasion Peter is praised and promised to be the "rock" upon which the Messiah will build his church (16:17-18), but on one immediate occasion called to stand behind. Peter was a Jew and could not take lightly the

promise of a Messiah who would give up his life just at the moment when he could be claiming the leadership of Israel.

The Good News today is that in the same way that Peter spoke on behalf of his fellow disciples, he still intercedes on our behalf, in our hesitation to accept that Jesus is a different Messiah who makes himself weak in order to redress our human weaknesses, heal our fears and agonies. As we reflect on the story, we can easily see that the challenges we face today are not different from those of Jesus' day. Coincidentally, history repeats itself, look at how some of us address President Ramaphosa as a weak President when he could show more strength in the fight against corruption. What we fail to understand is that being a president of a country is one thing, being a president in a democratic country is another, being a president where not power but the law rules is one thing. The present text challenges our human imagination and resets our minds and habits, that even though we are Christians, we still relate at a very human level. A Messiah who calls his disciples to deny themselves and pick up their crosses, is a messiah who will always be far of human expectations. We need a Messiah, who following him, will lead us into corridors of power and privilege. We take it lightly that it is Jesus' self-surrender that enables us to do things that would never be able to fulfil in our own human strength.

In the Messiah which the present gospel offers, it is hard for us to understand that God's glory in Jesus is not revealed as Jesus walks through the corridors of power but as he walks in the dusty trails and silhouettes of humiliation and agony. That is where Jesus walked and continues to walk as we reel and wobble in our personal agonies. That is the path through which Jesus continues to lead his disciples and those who long to follow him. When the going is hard, that is where Jesus strengthens his disciples to bear the cost and burden of discipleship. Those who embrace his call and burden upon their shoulders, it is his love and tender compassion that will bear their cost and burden. Without this Messiah, Peter could not have become a rock, but a stumbling block. Without this weak Messiah, Peter could not have become the church. This is the Messiah who through his weakness transforms the anxiety and vulnerability of his disciples into springs of glory. We may prefer to see Peter as weak, rather than as human, but Jesus never calls the disciples to deny their humanity but to commit themselves to following him while fully accepting how vulnerable their humanity will be if they choose to embrace his will. Jesus expects those who long to follow him to be conscious of their humanity and vulnerability, never let their humanity vanish from them as they seek to serve him, but to always be mindful and conscious of their vulnerability. For Jesus himself was willing to be God's Messiah knowing that he might be handled and wounded as a consequence of his resolve to stand for justice, love and peace instead of privileges that come with power and prestige.

Amen