

TAKING UP THE CROSS
A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
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Bryn Athyn Cathedral

Our lesson from the Gospel of Mark began with Jesus speaking to his frightened, confused disciples, and telling them of events about to occur which they did not understand. Aside from mentioning their astonishment and fear, this passage in the tenth chapter of Mark does not detail how the disciples reacted to the Lord's prediction. But this was not the first time the Lord had talked to them about these things. The Gospel of Mark records two previous instances, in chapter 8 and chapter 9, of the Lord predicting His suffering, death, and resurrection. And when we look at those earlier scenarios along with this one from chapter 10, we can start to see some patterns in the disciples' reactions – patterns that might speak to how *we* sometimes respond to the idea of the Lord suffering and what it might mean for us.

The first time the Lord is recorded as speaking openly about His suffering, death, and resurrection is in Mark chapter 8. Peter had just confessed a belief that Jesus was the Christ. We read that after this,

[Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

On this occasion, we do see the disciples' immediate reaction. Peter, at least, responds with apparent indignation: "And Peter, taking Him aside, began to rebuke Him." (Mark 8:32) The Lord's response to Peter is startlingly blunt:

But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not wise in the things that be of God, but the things that be of men." (Mark 8:32-33)

As would happen on every similar occasion afterward, when the Lord foretold His suffering and death, His disciples demonstrated a lack of understanding about what kind of Christ, what kind of Messiah, the Lord was to be. He was not going to be an earthly warrior, an invincible superhero immune to all suffering, hailed by all as a glorious hero. He would feel pain. He would be mocked and spat on. He would even die – but He would rise again.

But that is not all. On all these occasions, the Lord followed His prediction of His own temptations and death with a call for His disciples to walk in His footsteps. On this first occurrence, in Mark 8, after rebuking Peter, the Lord said,

“Whoever wills to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Mark 8:34)

So it’s not simply that the Lord would suffer and die before rising again, but that anyone who wanted to be His disciple would have to be prepared to undergo something similar. And again, this is something that the disciples seem to have had a hard time grasping.

When the Lord predicted His crucifixion and resurrection a second time, in the ninth chapter of Mark, we read that again the disciples did not understand – “they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask Him” (Mark 9:32). This time, immediately afterward, they demonstrate their lack of understanding by arguing over who would be greatest, as they would again in chapter 10. Later, when they admitted what they had been arguing about, the Lord said, “If anyone wills to be first, let him be last of all, and a minister to all” (Mark 9:35), and placing a child in the midst of them, He said, “Whoever shall receive one of such little children in My name, receives Me.” In doing so, the Lord emphasized His own willingness to be small, to be the least, and He called them to have that willingness as well.

That brings us to Mark 10 and the lesson we read of the Lord’s third prediction of His suffering, death, and resurrection. Here, the Lord again made that connection between His own willingness to suffer and the importance of the disciples’ willingness to do the same. The disciples would have to “drink the cup” the Lord was about to drink and “be baptized with the baptism” He was about to undergo. On a literal level, this meant they would have to be prepared to undergo persecution and death. But the Lord wasn’t simply calling His disciples to undergo a one-time period of pain – He was calling them to *always* be laying down their lives, to live entire lives of service as He had; so He said,

Whoever wills to be great among you shall be your minister; and whoever of you wills to be the first shall be the servant of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give His soul a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43-45)

To be like the Lord is to be servant, not a dictator.

Now, it is easy to feel superior to the disciples in these cases – we live in a society that has been shaped by the Christian ideal of servant leadership, and even if leaders don’t always act

as servants, they know that they must play lip service to the idea. We know we are *supposed* to prefer service to greatness. But if we take an honest look at ourselves, we might find places where our own experience isn't so far off from that of the disciples, both in their desire to be first rather than last and in their unwillingness to think of the Lord as suffering.

For the disciples, those two things might have been connected – that discomfort at the idea of the Lord suffering and dying, and that misunderstanding of their own calling to be last rather than first. In the literal sense, the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah predicted a great warrior, who would free Israel from her enemies all around, and who would make the people of Israel the envy of all the surrounding nations. To be told that the glory they could expect was an as-yet-intangible heavenly glory, and that the road their necessarily involved suffering, might have been a hard thing to hear.

For us now, it can still be difficult to look squarely at the kind of hardships the Lord had to undergo in the world. Partly, that's from a good motivation – we want to emphasize the Lord's divinity. But it may also include a desire to look away from the fact that His path is not always an easy path. The teachings of the New Church are clear: from the time of the Lord's early childhood, He was continually attacked by the entirety of hell, going through the most grievous trials or temptations imaginable. Because His soul was Divine, the Lord would conquer all. But before His resurrection, there were parts of Himself which He inherited from His mortal mother where the Lord's experience was not one of peaceful confidence, but one of anguish and battle. When He was operating from those parts of Himself, the Lord experienced the Divinity within Himself as something separate, which is why we see Him praying to the Father as if to someone other than Himself.

The humanity that the Lord took on in the world was thus a servant in two senses. The Lord came to serve all people, but that human part of Himself also acted as a servant to the Divine part of Himself, carrying out the Divine will. When the Lord spoke to His disciples about His suffering and His servitude, He was echoing passages from Isaiah about the Messiah as a "suffering Servant." We read from Isaiah 53 of this Servant who would be despised and forsaken, who would know pain and weakness, who would bear the burden of our sins. *Arcana Coelestia* 1846 says of this passage,

By these words are signified the Lord's temptations; by His "bearing our sicknesses, and carrying our sorrows," is not meant that the faithful are to undergo no temptations, nor is

it meant that He took their sins upon Himself, and so bore them; but it means that by the combats and victories of temptations He overcame the hells, and in this way would alone, even as to His Human Essence, endure the temptations of the faithful.

That passage highlights the connection between the Lord's own temptations and the temptations or trials that a person undergoes in the process of being regenerated, the process of being transformed into a truer image of the Lord. The Lord told James and John that they would drink the cup that He drank and be baptized with the baptism that He was baptized with. The internal sense of this is laid out in *Apocalypse Explained* n. 893:

"To drink the cup that the Lord drank" has the same signification that the "cross" has [in other passages], namely, to undergo temptations; and "the baptism with which the Lord was baptized" signifies to be regenerated by temptations.

Just as the Lord became one with the Father by overcoming in temptations, so we became conjoined with the Lord by overcoming in temptations. But there is a vital difference. That passage from *Apocalypse Explained* continues:

But between the cup which the Lord drank and the cup which they are to drink there is the same difference as between the temptations of the Lord and the temptations of men. The temptations of the Lord were most grievous, and against all the hells; ...; but the temptations of men are against evils and falsities that are from the hells with them, and in these the Lord and not man himself fights, except against certain painful feelings. There is a like difference between the baptism with which the Lord was baptized and the baptism with which men are baptized as there is between glorification and regeneration.

Unlike us, the Lord fought from His own power; when we fight in temptations, the Lord is the one bearing the burden for us – He continues to *bear the burden of our sins*.

This reality is both encouraging and challenging. It is encouraging to know that the Lord has already overcome the hells and that He holds them in His power to eternity. But it is challenging to realize that the perfect Human, the only person in existence to have lived exactly as He was called to live, did not avoid suffering. In fact, just the opposite – He endured *more* suffering than anyone else in history. And as He told His disciples, if we are to sit on His right hand and His left hand, we will have to undergo trials and tribulations too. Like Him, we are called to humble ourselves as servants and ministers rather than rulers and great ones.

This doesn't mean we should go out of our way to seek suffering. Far from it! We pray in the Lord's prayer, "Lead us NOT into temptation." We do not go seeking trouble and hardship – but we do need to be prepared for it. Because there are things in us – or more accurately, communities of hell that we are connected to – that do not want us to be transformed, that do not want us to be regenerated. And they will do everything they can to stop it from happening. They will mock us and tell us we're being foolish to think we could change. They will tell us we don't NEED to change. They will throw a thousand failures in our faces as evidence that we are hopeless. And when we start to get on the right track, they will try to convince us that it could not POSSIBLY be the right track, just as Peter unwittingly spoke in opposition to the Lord's prediction of the suffering He would endure.

What this means is that, sometimes, doing the right thing will be uncomfortable. We sometimes have a sense that we will know right from wrong just from our feelings – if it feels right it's probably right, if it feels wrong it's probably wrong. But our feelings can be misleading. We need to act as *servants* of the Lord – to live by our understanding of the truth, whether it feels right or not. We serve the Lord just as the Lord served the Divinity within Himself that He called the Father.

But again, the good news is that we are not alone in this. In our temptations – even if they bring us to the point of despair, even when we feel abandoned, even as we put in every ounce of our own strength, as we must do – in all our temptations, the Lord is fighting for us, and we can fight from Him.

One of the most powerful things we can do as we strive to overcome evil is to watch the Lord do perfectly what we do imperfectly. *Arcana Coelestia* 9937 says that, although the Gospels say little of the Lord's temptations, those temptations are described at great length in the Prophets and especially the Psalms. In a moment, I'll read a section from Psalm 119, the longest Psalm. If we were to think about David as the speaker, we might rightly have reservations – did David really follow the Lord this perfectly? We might have the same problem if we were to think of ourselves as the speaker – we know that we fall short of the ideal expressed here. But a little book from the teachings of the New Church called *Prophets and Psalms* says that this whole Psalm is about the Lord, and how He “fulfilled the Law, or the Word, from its firsts to its lasts, and therefore He was hated, and suffered temptations, and thus made the Human one with His

Divine” (PP 369). And so, in the internal sense, the following words are about what the Lord did in the world, about the way His humanity which would serve His Divinity:

Remember the Word to Thy servant,
On which Thou hast caused me to hope.
This is my comfort in my affliction;
That Thy sayings have given me life.
The presumptuous have scorned me, even exceedingly;
I have not gone aside from Thy law.
I have remembered Thy judgments from an age, O Jehovah,
And have comforted myself.

When we look to the Lord as the one experiencing these words, it can give us hope. Someone has done this right. And we can have a relationship with Him that mirrors the one He had with that Divinity in Himself. And because He is with us, He can overcome for us.

We can let this happen especially by remembering *why* the Lord continually allowed Himself to be attacked, why He continually fought and overcame hell. As we read in our lesson from *Arcana Coelestia*, in all His combats of temptations, the Lord did not fight that He might become the greatest in heaven, nor even that He might become the least, but only that all others might become something, and be saved. When we repent of evils and seek to be freed from their hold on us, we are *not* simply doing so as a self-improvement project, to make *ourselves* better. We seek to be regenerated and born again so that we can participate in the Lord’s love, a love of serving and ministering to one another. Even through temptations, we allow the Lord to transform us so that His goal can be accomplished, the goal of drawing each person He has created into an eternal union with Himself, to give them eternal joy. *Amen*.

Lessons: Isaiah 53:1-7, 11-12; Mark 10:32-45; *Arcana Coelestia* 1812

Arcana Coelestia 1812. He who fights from the love of becoming the greatest in heaven, does not believe in Jehovah, but rather in himself; for to desire to become the greatest is to desire to command others; thus, he fights for command. Thus, from the love itself from which anyone fights, it may be known what his faith is. But in all His combats of temptations the Lord never fought from the love of self, or for Himself, but for all in the universe, consequently, not that He might become the greatest in heaven, for this is contrary to the Divine Love, and scarcely even that He might be the least; but only that all others might become something, and be saved.