

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity  
September 3, 2017

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Many people reading today's gospel passage conclude there are two major players on the scene: Jesus, the Son of God, and Simon Peter. And that perception is just fine with the *third* major player, because the devil himself operates in the shadows in and around human souls. The devil needs to be there! Simon Peter had just proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Holiness was breaking out! And the old snake in the grass has a vested interest in preventing that from happening.

It was Satan who had first tempted the Lord to reveal His true identity. This was in the wilderness following the Lord's baptism. Jesus had said "Begone, Satan." The Lord desired to wait until the moral and spiritual instinct in a man would discover the Messiahship. This would result from faith and knowledge and personal experience with Jesus. Peter was the first to burst forth with the proclamation, and as soon as it happened the Lord had to *stop* the disciples from spreading the news. Jesus knew the world would do what Satan back in the wilderness had attempted: to make Jesus a popular leader of an "approved type." Being *politically correct* would make a train wreck of the Gospel!

That is the reason for the stern prohibition against proclaiming the Lord's identity as Messiah. And then the Lord continued to prepare the Twelve disciples for the fact His Messiahship would not be a time of happy rejoicing in Galilee but one of condemnation, degradation, and death, in Jerusalem. From the vantage point of 2000 years of Resurrection good news, you and I can only imagine what a shock the Lord's teaching was. The disciples were ready for "Happy Days are Here Again" and Jesus said the tune was "See the Destined Day Arise."

Some people see this moment as Peter going from star pupil to class dunce. But *that* would reflect on Our Lord's Own judge of character. Rather, it is closer to the mark to see in Peter a loving heart which could not fathom the idea of personal shame and suffering for His wonderful Lord and Master. Yes, Peter is impulsive. And so he burst out in indignant repudiation of any such thing as a Cross for Jesus. But in fact he was only expressing the thoughts of all the disciples.

This episode is best understood when we remember the great standoff in the wilderness. That is where Satan tempted the Lord in at least three ways. According

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to St Luke's Gospel the devil then left Jesus "until an opportune time." *Was that time now?* Here is a pure and tender human love coming from Peter for perhaps the first time. On behalf of all the disciples he was begging Jesus to turn away from the path leading to the Cross. Right here may be the most acute temptation Jesus ever felt. The Lord could resist Satan in the wilderness. In a one-on-one, the devil is no match for the Second Person of the Holy Trinity! But here were weak human souls involved, just at the point of a spiritual breakthrough.

The account of it says Jesus "turned and spake to Peter." There is an important moment *after* Jesus turned and *before* He spoke. It was in that moment the Lord Christ looked straight through Peter and saw a dim form standing behind the disciple. Jesus recognized the old adversary once more. We can only imagine the shock on Peter's face and on the others' at the vehemence of the Lord's rebuke. *They* could not see the devil! And after all, Peter had just expressed the true love each disciple felt for the Master. See how insidious and crafty evil can be! Peter's outburst was one of honest and heartfelt love. But it was about *Peter's* plan for Jesus and not *God's* plan for all humanity. The devil found a place to drive a wedge. And the Lord knew it.

Being a follower of Christ can tempt us into an expansive version of selfishness when we try to draw Almighty God into what we think best for the world, the Church, *and ourselves*. But that is why we have role models set before our eyes when we stay steeped in the worship and teaching of the Church. We rightly think of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our Lady is never recorded as having pressed any temptation upon her Son by using a mother's love. This is indicative of just how full of grace her life was. Blessed Mary is the preeminent sign of the natural understanding of God's ways when there is a perfect union of a sinless nature with the will of God.

There are others as well. We learn about Simon of Cyrene and Veronica in the devotions of *The Stations of the Cross*. With Blessed Mary they did not resist the Cross but *consented* to it, for Jesus, and for themselves. Every one of us who in the course of life ever bears any suffering in memory of the suffering Saviour has cancelled some part of the great load of human sin and helped the Lord carry His

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burden. St Peter learned to do this, and by God's grace we will too. For as St John of the Cross says, "One who does not seek the Cross of Jesus is not seeking the glory of Christ."