

To understand this Sunday's Gospel it's essential to remember its predecessor: the moment of grace when Peter salutes Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, and Jesus gives Peter his personal beatitude:

*Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah:
it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*

The experience of receiving God's revelation, when we are personally lifted up beyond our humanity, is truly called blessedness; and if we have always treasured the experience of transcendence, in our Western culture, it is because of our meditation on the colossal experience of discovering the endlessness of Christ in the human being that we have met and listened to and watched and touched with our hands. This has made us look to one another for the same experience of transcending the limitations of our nature; and this is a God-given thirst for the fulness of life, and for the giftedness we call grace.

When you contemplate the record of Western religious art, you find a wealth of meditation on the mysterious depths we can encounter in human experience; the multitudinous images of the mother and child bear witness to our knowledge of God through birth and parenthood; the images of prophets encountering the word on the mountaintop, the images from the life of Christ, healing and teaching and calling; the imagery of the saints, whose lives are lived on the frontier between the human and the divine; anyone familiar with modern religious art will know the plethora of paintings inspired by the temptation of St Anthony, in which the wild experiences of a solitary Egyptian hermit inspire art from eighteen centuries later.

This week we find the bearer of that beatitude suddenly and fiercely punished; nowhere else does Jesus accuse anyone of embodying Satan, and the way in which Matthew voices the exchange is very specific: Jesus accuses Peter of thinking like a man, but not like God. The point of dissent is, as we might expect, the Cross. This is the first mention of the Cross in the Gospel, and it comes just as all people are speaking well of Jesus, and his ministry appears to be at its zenith. It is when Peter mentions the word *Christ* that Jesus appears suddenly to advance into the territory of sacrifice and death. Now Peter reveals the limitation of his religious compass, which moments ago gave him such golden praise:

On this Rock I will build my Church, to prevail against the gates of hell; what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, what you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven

Suddenly Peter is a stumbling block, and Satan; and we have to ask ourselves how we measure up to the great demand for transcendence, which enables human beings to contemplate the Cross as the only path to life. In art we are speaking of the agony in Gethsemane, the crucifixion-scenes, and the countless representations of martyrdom in all its forms. In life, it is more dramatic and more demanding. It may be that we can tell ourselves that if the great demand were laid on us to suffer and die for tremendous values, for those we love, for people we were moved to give everything to save, we would rise to the occasion by some particular effusion of grace. What brings us down is the stumbling-block of the present moment. In its total humility, the call to carry the cross comes to us in ways we find easy to refuse: it does not appear grand and transcendent, but poor and irritating; it is an annoying man or woman, it is a tiresome situation of waste and loss, it is the fruitless and repetitive bearing of stupid and unnecessary difficulty. What does the salvation of humanity look like to God: as an heroic enterprise? Or as a demand to enter into the low ceiling in which blind creatures stumble through meanness and ignorance, laying waste as they go to the image of God bestowed on them? Jesus wept over Jerusalem because it could not see the moment of grace, because of the heat of its day and the smell of its dust, because of the heritage of its bitterness and failure, because it had built its faith around sin instead of grace. To think like a man instead of like God is all too easy for us. That is why in the scene of the crucifixion the hammer and the spear are in our hands.