



## Homily for 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

There is a devil, Screwtape, who is high up in the bureaucracy of Hell, and his nephew, Wormwood, a very young and naive devil, is just beginning his training in the satanic civil service. So Screwtape writes a set of letters to his nephew (as edited, or rather written, by C.S. Lewis) to advise him on how he needs to approach humans in order to coax as many as possible into Hell. One of his best lessons is about complacency. He says: It is just when the human thinks he or she is really becoming holy, starting to feel they are living as God wants, have done enough to earn heaven, then that is a great time to strike. Their guard is down. It is those who think they are doing well who are easiest to tempt into sin via complacency.

I am not sure that we can accuse St. Peter of complacency exactly here, but after his great declaration of who Jesus is, which he gets right, he then takes it upon himself, for the best of motives as he sees it as a human, to persuade Jesus against the very thing he has come here to do.

Screwtape would see this as the very best devilry at work. As does Jesus. One problem for us that comes up so often in the gospels is that we are often being called to make a decision, we often refer to this as a process of discernment. We often talk about the real meaning of 'repent' as one of change. But I am not always sure we can work out exactly what Jesus is asking of us. It is hard for me sometimes to see what he might be asking of me. What does he want me to do differently? How does he want me to change? Sometimes it is obvious and sometimes I respond, probably, almost certainly not enough. But on other occasions we can be a more than a bit uncertain. How far does Jesus need me to go? What are we to look for?

One commentator on this gospel talks about Jesus speaking of our search as one for a 'new humanity.' (We used to speak in old translations as the search for the 'New Man'.) He explains Jesus' repeated instructions to the disciples in the gospel not to rush to speak to the people yet, to keep quiet, (that theologians often refer to as the 'Messianic secret' in Mark,) because they have not yet discovered what this 'new humanity' Jesus is taking of is about. Peter is used here as an example of getting it so wrong, (to the extent of being called Satan,) simply because he has yet to understand what this might mean in his life, and so the instructions he gives are those that still come from the old humanity. Save yourself, Jesus.

I have mentioned this before but just want to say it again, we have been catching up with baptisms recently since the lockdown rules were modified, and certain words stick with you. When one of the godparents wraps a white garment

(which come in a variety of forms I have discovered over the years), they wrap it round the child, and we say, 'You have put on Christ.' 'Clothed yourself in Christ.' This is getting close to what Jesus is on about. When we put on Christ, or as we grow into that garment if we were baptised as a baby, we are accepting that Jesus' death and resurrection are somehow the most important things in our lives. Why? Because that enables us to find this 'new humanity.' St. Paul is on the same search and he says in Ephesians: 'put on the new humanity, created after the likeness of God in true and right holiness.' That word 'likeness' takes us back to Genesis, that we are made in the image and likeness of God. It is that initial perfection that Jesus can make us worthy of and return us to, which is the 'new humanity.'

So the way the gospel is set out is a description of this journey. We begin being able to make a statement of faith like Peter. But that is not the end of the journey as we have still not truly discovered what this requires of us, so we continue to act as the world would expect, as Peter does when he assumes he is saving Jesus from death, when in fact it is Jesus' death that will save him. So Jesus challenges him. The set of prophecies about Jesus' death and resurrection in the gospel seem so outlandish to human ears that they force a decision. So making the next big step is about whether we accept that his death and resurrection are the path to transformation or not. Can we decide? What comes next?

Then comes the actual process of transformation. Modern TV and film are full of transformations of all sorts, especially of the Marvel Comic variety. Humans are not strangers to change and in fact we often look forward to it, hope for it, especially when we look in the mirror in the morning, got to the hairdressers or the gym; at times we fear it.

But what Jesus asks is tougher in that there is no outward change. No change that makes us superficially more beautiful, or stronger, or powerful, healthier. This requires a readiness to change our approach to life, our life. A change that looks towards just what that commentator called the 'new humanity.' This is what Jesus means, I think, when he says we 'have to renounce our life, (that is the old life as we used to see it, with us at the centre) and take up the cross.' And when Jesus says we have to renounce 'self' and lose our lives. The new humanity that we need to be searching for is what St. Paul calls, living not our lives but the life of Christ. 'It is Christ who now lives in me,' Paul says, in an attempt to explain this. It is a life that does not so much follow Jesus but lives in Jesus, is a companion to Jesus and walks as he does. Puts Jesus and so others at the centre.

Jesus is always about preventing us from being easy targets for Screwtape, or even Wormwood, for that matter. He knows only too well that we are weakest when we see ourselves as the centre of the universe, of our little world.