“From Hero to Zero”

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Few people in recent memory have gone from hero to zero as quickly as Neymar da Silva Santos, Jr. Common known as Neymar, he is a Brazilian soccer player who plays for the Spanish club FC Barcelona and is a member of the Brazilian national soccer team. At the age of 19, Neymar won the 2011 South American Footballer of the Year, winning it again in 2012. His playing style has earned him critical acclaim, with many players and fans comparing him to Brazilian legend Pele, who has called Neymar “an excellent player.” To some fans of soccer, Neymar is the best player in the world.

As this year’s World Cup approached, expectations in Brazil were very high on the chances of both their national team and their national hero bringing home the world championship. But unfortunately for Brazil (and fortunately for fans of the German team), the tournament did not turn out as they as expected; Brazil was humiliated in the semi-final game, losing 7-1 to Germany, and even lost the consolation game to the Netherlands. Neymar didn’t even have the opportunity to play in either of these matches; after scoring four goals earlier in the competition, he fractured a vertebra in his spine in the quarter-finals and missed the rest of the tournament. He received the Bronze Boot as the tournament’s third top goalscorer, and was named in the World Cup All Star XI.

But in spite of his stellar play in the opening rounds of the tournament and the fact that he did not play in the later matches, Neymar became the scapegoat for the Brazilian fans’ rage after their humiliating defeat to Germany. A headline in the British newspaper *Metro* reported that in the aftermath of that defeat “Neymar goes from hero to zero as furious Brazil fans burn shirt – and he wasn’t even part of German rout.” Videos appeared on the internet of fans burning Neymar’s #10 jersey in the streets of Rio de Janiero, making their former idol the symbol for all that went wrong in failing to bring the World Cup home to Brazil. Neymar’s career in Spain will continue, but whether he will ever be able to reverse course and go from zero to hero again in Brazil remains to be seen.

Neymar is the latest in a long history of famous persons who fortunes have suddenly plummeted, who have gone from hero to zero in spectacular fashion:

- Scott Norwood was the kicker for the Buffalo Bills in their appearance in Super Bowl XXV in 1991 against the New York Giants. On the final play of the game, Norwood had the opportunity to kick the winning field goal and become a legend in western New York; but his he went from prospective hero to zero when his kick sailed “wide right” and the Giants won the championship game 20-19.
- Richard Nixon might have been remembered as one of the greatest US presidents after his visit to China and his landslide reelection victory in 1972; but his fortunes quickly turned as he became embroiled in the Watergate scandal, and he went from hero to zero when he became the only president in American history to resign from office on August 8, 1974.
- In today’s Gospel lesson, Simon Peter goes from hero to zero when the disciple Jesus praised in last week’s reading as “blessed” and the “rock on which I will build my church” is chastised by our Lord as “Satan” and a “stumbling block.”

This morning’s reading from Matthew is a continuation of the account we heard last Sunday of Jesus’ asking his disciples what the “word on the street” is concerning the Son of Man. After reporting to him all that have heard people saying about the man from Nazareth, Jesus then asks his disciple who they thing he is, to which Peter responds on behalf of the group, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (16:16). Jesus praises Simon Peter for this answer, “for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” (16:17). Jesus then goes on to announce that Simon will be Peter the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, and bestows on this church the office of the keys, so that “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (16:19).
As last week’s Gospel ended, Peter was clearly the hero of the story, the one whose confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ would be the strong foundation upon which the Church would be built to last through all generations.

But Peter’s fortunes change suddenly as today’s Gospel lesson unfolds. It begins with Jesus sharing with his disciples the first of four predictions in Matthew of what will happen to him when they reach their destination in Jerusalem:

· “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” – 16:21.

In view of the first century Jewish understanding that rejection, suffering, and death belonged to the vocation of a true prophet, and in light of the martyrdom of John the Baptist (14:1-12), Jesus was also expecting rejection, suffering, and death. His imminent resurrection would vindicate him and be the eschatological victory of God.

This encounter and announcement with his disciples marks a turning point in the Gospel; “from that time on” Jesus turns inward to instruct his disciples, a focus that continues through 20:34. The suffering of the Son of Man is necessary, not as “fate” in the Greek sense but as God’s will as revealed in Scripture: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6).

· “The word and its biblical background are thus carefully chosen to express the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility at work in the suffering and death of Jesus.” – Eugene Boring.

Matthew unites the elders, chief priests and scribes into one group, making clear that it is the Jewish leadership, NOT the Jewish people, who are responsible for Jesus’ coming death. Both “be killed” and “be raised” are in the passive voice; Jesus does not “rise” on his own, for the resurrection is an act of God. He is to be raised “on the third day,” representing both the time between Friday and Sunday and fulfilling the prophecy written in Hosea 6:2: “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.”

But even though Jesus is certain of what awaits him in Jerusalem and how this is in keeping with God’s will, Peter will have none of this; the disciple who boldly proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah now “took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’” (16:22). Peter may simply be reacting out of personal love for Jesus; after all, who among us wouldn’t react in the same way if our dear friend shared such horrific news with us? His reaction might also have been motivated with his understandings of messiahship, and that the “living God” who sent Jesus to be the Messiah of his people wouldn’t allow his enemies to defeat him; after all, hadn’t God promised that “so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)? How could the Messiah, for whom the people had been yearning for so long, be killed in such a sudden and violent manner?

But Jesus is not interested in Peter’s opinion on the fate of the Messiah, nor is he about to heed his disciple’s advice. His counter response is to call Peter to renewed or deeper discipleship; “get behind me” echoes the discipleship formula in 4:19: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Jesus’ reference to Peter as “Satan” is a reminder that the testing that Jesus had met and overcome in his initial encounter with Satan in the wilderness was not once for all; “it reappears in the sincere and prayerful remonstrance of the disciple.” (Boring). Jesus interprets the temptation to accomplish his ministry in the way human criteria judge such an endeavor to be successful as a demonic temptation. Jesus’ kingdom is a radically different way of exercising rulership and authority; as Jesus would declare when he is brought before Pontius Pilate, “my kingdom is not from this world.” (John 18:36). As his opponent in the wilderness was the embodiment of evil, here Jesus’ opponent is the “rock” on which Jesus will build his new community; only now Peter the rock becomes Peter the stone of “stumbling” (skandalon), for he has set his mind “not on divine things but
on human things.” (16:23). Peter is like the one in Isaiah who “will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 8:14).

- “Despite his revelation from God, Peter continues to think as good human beings are accustom to think: reasonably, egocentrically, and in terms of human friendship and ‘success.’” – Boring.

Possibly sensing that Peter’s misguided understanding of his true identity as the Messiah, Jesus calls together the Twelve for instruction on the meaning of discipleship to those who are already in the community, who like Peter have made the Christian confession but are still “thinking according to human standards rather than the divine revelation.” Jesus’ words are not an invitation to discipleship for outsiders (there are other instances where he will invite new followers into the community), but are a reflection on the meaning of discipleship for those who have already responded to the call of Christ. Jesus’ announcement of the Son of Man’s own way to the Cross is also the way the disciple must follow; Christology and discipleship are inseparable:

- “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” – 16:24-26.

Those who seek to preserve their lives by living selfishly end up actually forfeiting themselves, while those who follow our Lord in the way of the Cross will discover that whatever they have left behind pales in comparison to the indescribable riches that await those who follow our Lord not only to the Cross but to the Resurrection and the promise of everlasting life. Jesus’ saying echoes the words of Psalm 49:7-9, encouraging his followers not to fall prey to the follow of trusting in themselves and in their own resources but to “the Son of Man [who] is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father” (16:27):

- “Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice that one should live on forever and never see the grave.”

Ultimately, this is not a story of Peter’s descent from hero to zero, from being the one who is the solid rock upon which Christ will build his church to the stone of stumbling that seeks to deter our Saviour from his path to the Cross. Peter is neither being praised because of his superior faith nor chastised for his lack of understanding; in both situations, Jesus is teacher Peter and his disciples that in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus they must not trust in their own resources, base their decisions upon what is most advantageous to themselves, and not base their judgment on conventional human wisdom. As Jesus praised Peter because his confession of faith was revealed to him not by “flesh and blood” but by “my Father in heaven,” our Lord calls his disciple to task when he sets his mind “not on divine things but on human things.” Rather than looking on to Peter as yet another public figure whose fortunes have fallen in his descent from hero to zero, we need to look at his encounters with Jesus as a cautionary tale for all of us not to base our judgments on our own thoughts, needs, or desires; if we are to answer the call to discipleship, we need to follow Jesus in all aspects of life – his example, his teachings, his will for us as his Church. We need to heed to words spoken by the prophet Isaiah, who cautions us not to equate our will with the Will of God:

- “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” – Isaiah 55:8-9.

When we answer the call to follow Jesus, we have the assurance that our Lord does expect us to act as heroes, nor will be condemn us if our actions might be interpreted by others as the act of a “zero.” What our Lord does expect of those who would be his disciples is trust in his Word, trust in following his example, and trust that even if our Lord’s will differs from ours that when we put aside our own interests and seek to fulfill what God would have us do in his name that we will be the church that is the Body of Christ, called to “let
your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16).

When we join our voices in confession our faith in “Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord,” we are joining with Peter and all those whose faith has been built upon the solid rock that has been revealed to us by God’s Holy Spirit; for as Peter was able to confess Jesus as the Messiah through the power of “my Father in heaven,” so too do we know that “by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him” (Small Catechism), but that it is through the presence of the Holy Spirit that we receive the ability to believe in Christ as our Lord and Saviour. When we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are acknowledging our tendency to be like Peter when we desire that God’s Will conform to our will, that God follow our desires instead of us being the ones to follow our Lord and to seek to fulfill his will. We acknowledge that “God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and through us.” We always begin this prayer with the words “Our Father,” because as members of the new community that Christ has called in this generation we pray that together we might accomplish God’s Will, putting aside our own agendas and desires in order that we might faithfully follow our Lord:

· “What is required now is the kind of earnest and informed commitment to Jesus as the Christ that will be prepared as he was, through self-sacrifice, voluntary suffering, and informed, disciplined service, to be Christians in the midst of the world. If that kind of Christianity is lived, there can be no doubt about it – some, perhaps many, will ask for ‘the reason why.’ Then, and I think only then, usually, will it be appropriate and good for Christians to speak openly about their faith and ‘the hope that is in them.’” – Douglas John Hall, Why Christian?

Time will tell if Neymar will once again be considered a hero in the eyes of Brazilian soccer fans. While Scott Norwood was waived by the Bills after his notorious failure in the Super Bowl, he is now the father of three children and a successful insurance salesman. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, lived the rest of his life in the shadows and was buried in a simple ceremony that lacked the pomp and pageantry usually afforded to former American presidents. Peter, of course, would once again fail spectacularly when he denied Jesus three times following his arrest; but his failure did not define him for our Lord called upon his disciple to “feel my sheep,” and Peter became the first apostle to proclaim the Gospel on the day of Pentecost. We can be “heroes” or “zeroes” in the eyes of others, but our neither expects heroic actions nor condemns spectacular failures. Our call is to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour; for “we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.” Amen.