

‘Get behind me, Satan,’ is a very harsh way of putting someone down or pulling them up short. It’s like a road-block, a barrier, a wall. It’s said so as to stop Peter in his tracks. And here, it’s an act of love. Jesus loves Peter enough to shock him into salvation. What Peter says is sensible and loving in worldly terms. Who wouldn’t want to save the one they love from suffering, from death? But Jesus is operating on another plane altogether. Life on earth is good; we are made by God after all to live on earth; this is our blessed home; it’s beautiful to be here – or can be – should be. Why, we’ve even been given it to look after. It’s a precious gift but it’s given in order to bring us to God, it’s not an end in itself. It’s given to teach us our limitations, including the limitation of death. Any gardener will tell you how difficult it is to produce the perfect garden: things keep dying on us; everything is subject to being gnawed and nibbled. Think of Peter as the perfect gardener spraying everything to the nth degree, manicuring the lawns to an inch of their life and keeping the hedges firmly under control. This is us working out our desire to live on earth forever – heaven on earth; and we can do that with one another. But this is not the sort of control that Jesus wants Peter to exercise over his Church, over his people, over his world. For the garden that God allows is rich with life of every size shape and description with death as a radical force for good. That, too, is a very stark statement, said to bring us up short. Peter, like most of us, sees death as the enemy, but Jesus sees it as a way of victory, of giving life its true meaning. But Jesus, like Jeremiah, is not looking for trouble. He’s simply being himself in a world where others cut everything down which threatens their desire to live in this world forever, who mistake riches for true wealth, who manipulate the poor in order to produce more, who live life as a lie – both to others and to themselves. You can see the parallels with today, indeed, with all of history. The role of Peter and the Church is to challenge this world view. Taking up one’s cross does not, then, mean enduring suffering for suffering’s sake but suffering for the sake of the gospel, for the good news of God’s love for everyone of us, and, indeed, every creature. This means pulling up others short when their actions fall short of God’s love for all. But we have no right to do this unless we ourselves know what it is to love. This is love without fear of death – indeed, death becomes our friend.

I’m acutely conscious that every word spoken here can be taken out of context and misapplied.

There’s a time to live and a time to die.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour