

Sermon for Sunday 3 September 2023 - The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Jeremiah 15.15-21; Psalm 26.1-8; Romans 12.9-21; Matthew 16.21-28

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm going to take the opportunity this morning, as we maybe have a little bit more freedom within a Morning Worship service than we have in a eucharist service, to work through the passage. And then I'm going to leave you with a question at the end, okay? That's where we're going this morning. The question you have at the end may well be, what on earth was curate Graham on about? But I will leave you with a question, okay? So you may have two questions.

But let's just deal, before I come to the main section of looking at Peter - hero becoming villain, and we'll just deal and put aside the very last bit of the Gospel passage - 'The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father. And truly, I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' Church tradition grew up that some of the disciples and people who heard Jesus say this might still be now, 2000 years later, walking around unbeknown to us, unaged, and looking for the coming of Jesus, again. No - where he's talking about the Son of Man coming in his kingdom he is talking about his death, resurrection and ascension. So let's just simply put that to one side, okay?

And we're going to look at Peter. He manages to go from hero to villain in eight verses. You go, well, where's the Hero bit of Peter in the passage we read this morning? Well, what I'm going to ask you to do is remember the passage, the Gospel passage from last week. And if you weren't here or you need reminding, that is when the disciples are up with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, that is quite a bit north of the Sea of Galilee. Today it's known as Dan, and it's an amazing rock structure, if any of you know, places like Stanage Edge and places like that, a big cliff face. And in the cliff face, there's gushing water. There was an earthquake quite a few years ago now, and it's split. It doesn't quite have the same effect.

But at Caesarea Philippi, people worshipped two deities, primarily. One was Pan, who was a mythical god man creature, so it's a god man, and Caesar, who was a man god. So the Caesars believed that they were a deity and they were worshipped as such. You have Caesarea Philippi, this wonderful theatrical backdrop with water gushing out - and even today you can see the niches in the wall to Pan. So they're worshipping Pan, a god man, and they're worshipping Caesar, a man god. And in front of this wonderful theatrical backdrop, Jesus says to his disciples, and I can imagine just saying, well, they say that Pan is a god man, and they say that Caesar is a man God. Who are they saying that I am? And more importantly, who do you say that I am?

And Peter, the hero at this point says, 'I know who you are. You're the Christ. You're the son of the living God. You're the one that we, the people of God, have been waiting for.' - I paraphrase. And Jesus

commends him, blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. This has not been revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father.

And then we come to today's Gospel passage, because from that time - this is a pivotal point in Matthew's gospel - it parallels the pivotal point in Luke's gospel where Jesus has been in Jericho, and it says at that time he turned his face towards Jerusalem. Now it doesn't mean he'd not been there before. John's gospel tells he's been there several times for the festivals, but it says he's turning his face to Jerusalem, to his passion, to his suffering, his death, his resurrection. From this time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem - see the parallel there - and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, the priests and the scribes; be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And can you imagine Peter? Peter's just said, in answer to the question, 'Who do you say I am?', 'You're the Christ, you're the son of the living God. You're the one that we've been hoping for, who will restore Israel, who will overturn the Roman occupation, who will liberate God's people to be the people of God.' And then Jesus says, 'I'm going to Jerusalem to suffer, be killed. And yes, he does say that he's got to rise again. But can you imagine Peter going, you're the son of the living God, you're not doing that. No way, José.'

I wonder whether when we read Scripture, it becomes a little bit sanitised; and Peter took him to side and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord.' Peter was angry - 'Lord, you are not going to do this, the Messiah, you're leading a messianic movement. You've got to lead us. You've got to go into Jerusalem, you've got to overthrow the Roman occupation and you've got to restore Israel.'

The same thing happened with the entry into Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday. Jesus' followers from Galilee, the ones from Galilee, had followed him, and they are the crowd who are saying 'Hosanna to the Son of David.' The inhabitants of Jerusalem are the ones that eventually cry 'Crucify.' But the crowds expected Jesus to go to the seat of power, to Herod's temple. If ever you go to Jerusalem, you can do this. You can walk down the Mount of Olives, you can walk and you think you're going to turn left and go to Herod's palace, but Jesus didn't, he turned right and he went to the tent. He did what people were not expecting. Peter here has forgotten that Isaiah said that Messiah had to suffer - all those wonderful verses in Isaiah about suffering servant, and Peter's forgotten that.

He says 'You're the Christ.' And the Christ says, 'I've got to suffer.' And he says, 'Oh, no, you're not going to do that.' And Jesus says, 'Get behind me, Satan.' That is harsh. I mean, if I came up to you, I'm not going to pick on anybody, am I? But if I came up to you, we had a little bit of a disagreement and I went, 'Get behind me, Satan.' That's a bit harsh, isn't it? What Peter has done here, I think, is he's got above himself - 'I've just been commended.' You can imagine Peter with the other disciples, can't you? 'I've just got a gold star. I've just gone to top of the class. I answered the question properly. He's the Christ, he's the son of living God.' And the next thing, 'Get in your place.' Those of you who've been teachers know that you can sometimes, and with your children, you can commend them and suddenly they get above themselves, don't they?

The place of a disciple was behind the teacher. It's as simple as that. Rabbis walked and talked. I don't know whether you've been on walks and rambles. What's it like when you're walking? You're at the front and you're talking and you've got people behind you - difficult to hear sometimes. Yeah. And you sort of turn around and you're walking and then you stumble. But that's the way it worked. And, yes, they'd gather around and teach, but often they're walking and talking with the disciples walking behind their rabi, their teacher. It was a sign, I think I've said this before, it was a sign of a disciple being close to the teacher, being attentive engaging with the teacher's teaching.

If they had dust on their tunic that had been kicked up by the feet of their rabbi, does that make sense to you? The closer you are to the dust being kicked up, the more you're going to get on you, therefore, the closer you were to your rabbi's teaching, you could tell. I don't know whether you get your Bibles, actually, this is just an aside, but this is not my daily reading Bible. If I had my daily reading Bible, you'd see it a bit more. But you can always tell whether people are reading their Bible and which bits they like reading. With your Bibles at home, which you do have, and I hope you do read them, you can look at the side of it and see where you gravitate. Because the oil on your thumb as you flick through the pages gets more on it and you'll find for some people, the Psalms are a bit more black and greasy on the edge of the page, or it's some of the nice, comforting words and short books like Jude or some of the prophets don't get a look in. And Leviticus is clean, but you can identify where you gravitate towards.

The same with the tunic. And some rabbis actually altered their sandals to kick up more dust, so their disciples got more dust on them, then they could brag to other rabbis, saying, my disciples listen to my teaching more. They've got more dust on them. Human nature's weird, isn't it?

So Peter's got above himself and he's told, 'Get back in your place and follow me.' Jesus says that he's a stumbling block. He's a stumbling block because he's presenting things that are contrary to the will of God, which Jesus is wanting to do. And what is contrary to the will of God is Satanic. There's no middle ground. It's either God's way or it's the way of the Satan evil. It's black and white here. And Peter, in saying to Jesus, 'You are not going to do that', is effectively saying, you're not going to follow the will of your Father. And there's only one alternative.

It's interesting that he described as a stumbling block, and when Peter, writing his letter to the churches, he says this about Jesus, about Jesus becoming the cornerstone. You may remember it, a stone that makes the people stumble, a rock that makes them fall. Interesting. I wonder whether Peter was drawing on his memories of being accused of being a stumbling block. And now seeing that the gospel is a stumbling block to those who won't receive it, I just wonder.

And then Jesus moves on and says what it is to be a disciple. 'Get in your place, Peter, and follow me. And let me explain what following me involves. It involves taking up your cross.' It involves taking up your cross and following where Jesus goes first. Now, he would be referring to the cross beam, same cross beam of a cross that Jesus carried that we remember on Good Friday. I hear people say that taking up your cross is about just carrying burdens and it's perseverance. Brothers and sisters, there are plenty of scriptural verses to support persevering with what life throws at us. But this is not it. If somebody was

carrying their cross, the cross beam of a cross of crucifixion, they were carrying it to their death. They were on death row and getting close to dying. They were walking to their execution. This is not about persevering through life's trial, this is about dying. Dying to self.

Paul writing to the church, or to Timothy, probably at Ephesus, but Timothy, 'If we have died with him, we will also live with him. There are others verses that I could have chosen. If we have died with Christ, how much more will we live his life right at the Church of Rome? The way of discipleship, brothers and sisters, is perseverance on one hand, but it is dying to self. What do we say at the end of the Eucharist service; 'We offer you ourselves, a living sacrifice. Send us out into the world.' The only problem with living sacrifices is they tend to crawl off the altar or climb off the cross.

Jesus went voluntarily to the cross, the way of obedience to the Father. We are invited to do the same; we are invited to die to self so that we might live in Christ. And the question I'm going to leave you with is what might that look like? What might it look like for you and for me, individually and together as a gathered community of believers in Jesus Christ?

What might that look like? Dying to self, so that we can live in and through our risen Lord Jesus Christ? What might saying, 'Yes, I will take up my cross and I will walk to my execution, my death sentence, so that I might be raised with Christ? What might that look like for each of us, individually and for us all together corporately? That's the question I leave you with to ponder. Amen.