

Sermon 30th August 2020 / Year A / 12th Sunday after Trinity

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living word, Jesus Christ our Saviour and redeemer. Amen

'From that time on Jesus began....' Matthew has used these words before following Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, they marked a turning point when Jesus proclaimed 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. And now, these words mark another turning point, pointing towards Jesus' death and resurrection. This follows last week's Gospel when Jesus asked his disciples - 'Who do you say I am?' and Peter, Jesus' friend and devoted follower, confessed his faith and belief that Jesus was the messiah, the Son of God. Now Jesus seeks to show Peter and the disciples what both messiahship and discipleship will entail. Up to this point Jesus has spent much of his time addressing crowds, working miracles, and verbally jousting with scribes and Pharisees. Now he starts to instruct the disciples—preparing them for what comes next, for Jerusalem and his cross. However, Jesus then tells the disciples not to tell anyone, because he knows that they do not yet understand what messiahship means. They still think of the messiah as being a warrior-king like David. Jesus outlines for them what to expect of the messiah, it's the exact opposite of their expectations and understandably they struggle to grasp what he is saying, they still don't get Jesus' true purpose.

When Peter then seeks to protect him from the suffering he prophesies, Jesus hears again the same message that he heard in his temptations in the wilderness - that he could achieve greatness without dying - 'surely God doesn't want His son to face this'. Peter has leapt in with both feet - instead of being the rock on which the Christian church will be built he acts more like the man who foolishly builds his house on the shifting sands, Jesus responds with love as well as anger, strongly rebuking Peter for this, using the same words he used against his enemy in the wilderness - 'Get behind me Satan', he will not be tempted. Jesus insists that God sees and thinks differently from humankind, he sees from the inside out. But maybe it is God who sees everything the right way round and it is us who see everything inside out, as did the disciples at that time. As Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'at the moment we see in a puzzling mirror, but eventually we shall see the way God sees'

Jesus tells his disciples - 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. A huge commitment, for them and for us, 'pick up your cross and follow me'. Are we up to the challenge? The call to follow Jesus called the disciples from wherever they were and whatever they were doing, just as it calls us, Jesus walking ahead of us, a compelling and mysterious figure. Following him will cost everything, but it will also give everything. It will be a difficult journey, a bit like learning to

swim, if you keep your feet on the bottom of the pool you'll never work out how to do it. You can't keep your feet on the bottom when the water becomes too deep, the choice is yours, to sink or swim, walking safely on the bottom isn't an option. Jesus made many astonishing claims during his ministry and to those who follow him today He is the risen and exalted Lord of the world, we don't have to wait as those who followed him then did .

Our first reading from Jeremiah teaches that honesty and faithfulness in the midst of suffering are the hallmarks of prophetic ministry. When Jeremiah laments the cost of faithful discipleship God reminds him that he was forewarned of the suffering he would experience. Jeremiah then, is not to crumble in the face of adversity but rather redouble his commitment to his prophetic vocation. Persecution did not derail God's promise to deliver and vindicate, and God reminds Jeremiah that his perseverance is the very means by which the people will be won over to repentance. In the midst of injustice, Jeremiah is not to allow evil to overcome good.

Paul wrote to his fellow Christians in Rome about the attitudes and habits needed to walk in the way of the cross - love, hope, suffering and prayer, you can't endure suffering without love and hope and you can't hope without making a connection to God through prayer. He exhorts them to - 'Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer'. Paul knows love, respect, patience and perseverance are often not the easiest skills to acquire, they need to be worked at and from his letters we get the impression that they didn't always come naturally to him, do they always come naturally to us?

Speaking with my spiritual director on Friday she suggested that perhaps the times we find ourselves in are not dissimilar to those that Peter and the disciples found themselves in on Easter Saturday - the time between the grief and sorrow of Good Friday and the elation of Easter Sunday, - the in-between time - struggling to come to terms with the consequences of what has happened and wondering what will happen now and in the times to come. We have all been living with the effects and consequences of Covid 19, the lockdown, the loneliness and isolation, missing family and friends, the possibility of quarantine, the loss of loved ones and for some of us the lengthy struggle to get back to full health, along with the very necessary procedures we must follow not just for ourselves but for everyone around us, to keep us all safe and well. We find ourselves six months later with no end in sight, with lockdown gradually easing further, with workers being encouraged to return to their offices if it is safe to do so, and schools starting to reopen this week. The need for love, respect, patience and perseverance has never been greater. Amen.