

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 12 (30 August)

Matthew 16:21-end

Poor Peter, you have to feel sorry for him. Last week, we heard of great honour being heaped upon him. He was the Rock, he was the Key to the future, he was clearly a born leader. Within the space of one verse, the author of Matthew changes tack, and Peter is now being seen as the devil-incarnate! Either Jesus is becoming a bit too moody for His own good, or something more profound is emerging within the text – my guess is it could be the latter.

The problem that last week's story poses – in the preceding verses of the chapter – is that it was almost too perfect, and utopian perfection is not a useful development at this stage. Yes, of course we hope for utter tranquillity in our relationship with God, but we more often have to journey along quite a difficult and challenging road to get there; and even when we so-called arrive, it can often be less-than plain-sailing trying to maintain our position. Being a follower of Jesus is exciting, but it is also quite daunting, and we often fall way behind schedule with it all. Matthew's evolving text today appears to be attempting to draw us to the reality of all this – it is not going to be a 'walk-in-the-park', but it will be worth it. It was as if Peter had to do what he did.

The expressive nature of this individual cannot be faulted, and we could perhaps focus on this for just a while, for as we do so we can see elements of ourselves woven within his features. He is portrayed throughout scripture as the 'keen' one, the enthusiast, the eager, the determined. He was often mistaken, he often messed up; like today, he got the wrong-end-of-the-stick as far as the message is concerned. But he never caves in. He might be weak – think to the scenes after Jesus' arrest, and that famous cockerel that crowed – but he never gave up, and history claims that he went to his death maintaining his total belief in the character and teaching of Jesus. He is not a bad example to follow – and there are scholars who believe that it was only the 'politic' of the day that led to Paul's version of Christianity becoming the lead characteristic of the faith to which we now subscribe, for many believed that it was Peter who provided the more significant lead in the days after the Resurrection. Our church may have looked and felt very different if his followers had out-manoeuvred Paul's.

However, we gain nothing by merely patting Peter on the head – instead, as we so vividly see in today's scripture, we need to learn from him, and learn from the outcomes and events that surround him and his friends. We need to perhaps put ourselves in that group, put ourselves within reach and witness, put ourselves firmly in Christ's presence – and listen to what is going on, and realise its message. Rather than simply read of others, we could and probably should be there in the midst of it all, a sentiment echoed in the extract from Jeremiah that would have been today's Old Testament reference [Jer 15:15-21].

Having established within the understanding of the disciples that the future evolution of faith lay in their hands, Jesus begins to make clear just what dramatic process must be endured for all of that to happen. One individual had to be sacrificed – had to be retired from the scene – in order for great and exciting things to evolve. Jesus had to leave them, and it had to be a process of profound

impact, so that it drove home not just to the believers, but to all around, that such an event has the potential to release phenomenal levels of energy and vitality for the future. We are living proof that this clearly happened some 2,000 years ago, and by our actions in the present day, it can and will continue. The Spirit of the Living Christ resounds within and around each of us, and as Jeremiah once again alludes, can never be hidden, white-washed over, or destroyed. Others have no choice! They have to see our enthusiasm for our faith for it bleeds out of us!

In fairness to Peter, it cannot have been easy comprehending what Jesus was saying. One minute you have got the 'keys to the kingdom' in your hands, and all seems powerful and majestic; the next, you are lining up to be executed as a common criminal, and you are innocent to boot! Unfairness appears to be interwoven within a script for life that you suddenly feel is not quite what you signed up for. And worse, your reaction is viewed as the devil-at-work. What happened to Jesus your friend? He now thinks you are His enemy, that great monster viewed by Hebrew tradition as the disruptor of life itself. So much conflicting imagery – and, inevitably, much of it reminiscent of life itself. Facing such critical moments and the dilemmas that they can so often invoke is part of what life is about. Nothing is perfect, and when you add the quirkiness of faith into the pot, the recipe evolves into a very mysterious dish.

But, it is a place which is worth aiming for. Matthew's text tries to reassure us of that. Get over the hurdles, it implies, and view what the greater picture might be. See the beauty. Feel the reality. Be aware of divine light. Be aware of God. Jesus promises Peter, his friends, and I imagine onlookers and participants such as us – He promises that the challenges of life when wrapped in faith will be manageable, however 'heavy' the weight of the cross and its influence may be, because its purpose will grow ever clearer. Too many people stumble and reject its burdensome nature in the early stages – but for those of us who persevere, the weight gives strength of character to the person, it gives focus to its objectives, it transforms into a vehicle, it has the potential to uplift. And all of this has a positive slant because far from being a mere executioner's block, it is a soaring arrow to the overriding message of hope contained in that first Easter story. Jesus needed to take issue with Peter because in his naivety he would have prevented the story from developing, and the release of almighty power through that cross may never have happened. We are living proof of the gratitude society should have that it did.

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