

Lent Reflections: Week 5

Wednesday March 18th: Mark 8.27-30

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸ And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹ He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'^(b) ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

"Who do you say I am?"

Jesus had already asked the disciples who people in general thought he was; now he asks them for a personal statement. Who do you say I am?"

At some point in our Christian journey, we all have to face and answer this question for ourselves. For those who have come to faith independent of upbringing, presumably the question was answered at the moment of conversion. Many of us though will have been raised in Christian families with church and Sunday School attendance the norm and the habit was continued into adulthood. So at what point did you decide for yourself that Jesus was important to you? Perhaps it was at a pivotal moment in your life such as moving away from home or getting married, when you had to decide whether or not to find a new church to attend. Maybe you were facing a crisis - illness, bereavement or redundancy- and you had to choose; accept and trust in God's love or reject him totally. Pause now to recall and reflect on the key moments of your Christian journey.

Having done that, you might like to try this exercise I use with Confirmation candidates:

imagine you have an encounter with an alien. He is visiting earth and has heard about someone called Jesus. He asks you to tell you about this person, who he is and why he is important to people generally and to you personally. What do you say to the alien? How would you, honestly and sincerely answer Christ's question: "Who do you say I am?"

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

We acknowledge you as our Lord and Saviour. Grant us, we pray, grace and courage to always acknowledge you to others and to joyfully spread the good news of your love, mercy and compassion.

Amen.

Thursday, March 19th: Mark 8.31-33

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me,

Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

When we read this passage most of us, I suspect, focus on Peter, either feeling sorry for him as the bearer of such an uncharacteristic rebuke from Jesus, or taking comfort from the fact that this man, who became the rock of the Church, so often got things wrong.

Maggi Dawn, however, turns her attention more to Jesus and his possible emotions at this exchange. Jesus has just warned his disciples of the suffering that is to come and his own imminent death. Impetuous, loyal Peter jumps to defend and reassure him but is rebuked by Jesus. The words of his rebuke suggest that in Peter's words, Jesus was hearing again the words of Satan when he assured Jesus that no harm would come to him if he threw himself from the highest point of the Temple. Now, in full knowledge of what was to come, Jesus is being told it can all be avoided; he doesn't have to die. Temptation came from his known enemy and his closest friend! The difference between Satan and Peter is that while Satan was perfectly aware of what he was doing and what he hoped to achieve, Peter acted in ignorance and from the best of intentions.

Temptation isn't a one off occurrence. We all face temptations, in various forms, every day. Sometimes they arise in predictable ways and from sources of which we are aware and possibly on our guard against. At other times, however, temptation may come from unexpected quarters and these are the most dangerous of all.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

When we face temptation, help us to hold fast to what is good and right.

Forgive us those times when we, knowingly or unconsciously, are the cause of others' temptations and guide us to do always and only what is pleasing to you.

Amen.

Friday, March 20th: Mark 8.34-38

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Today's reading is a difficult one for us to grasp; talk of taking up our cross implies great suffering and seems to contradict Jesus's offers of life in abundance, rest and easy yokes!

What we have to bear in mind are two things:

firstly, in today's passage Jesus addresses his remarks not only to his disciples - those who have already chosen to follow him - but to the crowd in general. Amongst that number will be doubters; people who have yet to decide whether or not they want to be Christ's disciples. Jesus wants such people to be in no doubt as to what

they will be "signing up for." To be a true disciple will inevitably involve some element of cost. For some that cost is still high with persecution, imprisonment and even death very real possibilities. For us, in generally tolerant Britain, the cost is less severe but can, nonetheless, involve us in heart searching and sacrifice. It might be something as seemingly trivial as having to decide whether to go with friends on a pleasure trip or attend Sunday service at church. Perhaps you've had to pass by a job promotion because the company ethics lie uneasily with your Christian beliefs; have you had to give up a favourite meal or toiletry because the company producing them has a bad human rights record? These are just a few examples of the sorts of sacrifice we might be called on to make - a cross of denial rather than actual physical suffering. Not everyone's cross will be the same. It is a question of personal integrity. We each must decide for ourselves, prayerfully, what it is that God is asking of us and, when we have discerned this, to follow with all our heart and will.

Jesus ends with a harsh warning: if we are ashamed of him in this life (that is, don't take up our particular cross, whatever that might be), then in his kingdom he won't deny us access, but he will be ashamed of us!

How do you feel about the prospect of making Jesus ashamed of you?

Prayer.

Loving and merciful Lord,

We pray for all who face persecution and death because they follow you. Grant them, we pray, the strength and courage to remain steadfast in their faith.

We thank you for the freedom we have to follow and serve you. Give us grace to follow our calling with integrity, that at the end, when we meet you face to face, you will not be ashamed to acknowledge us as one of your own. Amen.

Saturday, March 21st: Matthew 17.1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I^[a] will make three dwellings^[b] here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved;^[c] with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

"Six days later" Unless you have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible, those opening words may well have you asking "later than what?" To save you having to look, this event takes place six days after Peter had earned both Jesus's affirmation - when Peter recognised Christ's divine status - and a stern rebuke when the disciple tried to deny that Christ must suffer and die. Now, along with two others, Peter witnesses the transfiguration and his response is typically impetuous; while the other two disciples fall, terrified, with their faces to the floor, Peter starts making a plan of action! The three men demonstrate two different responses to extraordinary circumstances; one is to leap into action, the other to ponder and contemplate. In the Church, as in business, there is a place - and a need - for both the activist and the contemplative. We need people who are deeply engaged in prayerful discernment and can help us to understand what God wants and where he wants to take us. We equally need people who can then lead us forward, putting God's plans into action. Both responses are important and they go hand in hand, but the listening must always come first. Notice God's response to Peter's offer to start building shelters: he neither agrees nor disagrees. Instead he says: "This is my Son Listen to him."

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

In our eagerness to serve, we sometimes forget to listen and discern what you want. Forgive those times when we rush in, and help us to learn the art of patient discernment, that we may then serve you more effectively as we more truly do your will. Amen.

Sunday, March 22nd: Luke 10,38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. **39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. **40** But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' **41** But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; **42** there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

At first reading today's passage appears to repeat the message of yesterday - the place of both activist (Martha) and contemplative (Mary). Maggi Dawn, however, suggests using this story to examine a different issue; that of boundaries and the breaching of them.

She begins by giving some cultural background: important conversations - which surely included the teaching of Jesus - were the domain of the men. The women's role was to provide food and drink. In going to sit at Jesus's feet Mary was not simply leaving her sister to do all the work. Far more importantly, by joining the men she was breaking the cultural norms and upsetting the status quo. Notice here that Martha didn't call her sister back to the kitchen. Instead she complained about her to Jesus. So who was the real focus of Martha's frustration and anger? Was it her sister who had broken the rules of society, or was it herself for lacking the courage to join her? Perhaps the real focus was Jesus himself, for allowing, even encouraging, such

behaviour? Did Martha feel that being a friend of Jesus was dangerous and so she lashed out through fear?

To be a Christian will often mean behaving in ways that are counter-cultural. To what extent are you prepared to follow the way of Jesus rather than of society? What boundaries will you cross in order to listen to Jesus and learn from him?

Prayer.

Lord Jesus,

You went against the norms of society, mixing freely with all, regardless of race, gender or social status. Give us courage and compassion to also go against the norms of our society, seeking justice, inclusion and acceptance for all people. Amen.

Monday, March 23rd: John 11,17-27 and 34-44

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus^[d] had already been in the tomb for four days. **18** Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles^[e] away, **19** and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. **21** Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' **23** Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' **24** Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' **25** Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.^[f] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, **26** and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' **27** She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,^[g] the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

.. **34** He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' **35** Jesus began to weep. **36** So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' **37** But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' **40** Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' **41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' **43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Today's reading contains the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." (John 11,35), which despite its famous status, is easily overlooked in the high drama of the resurrection of Lazarus!

Jesus wept - but why did he weep if he knew what he was about to do? Several theories have been put forward:

Jesus was fully human, so perhaps this was a natural expression of human grief. Knowing that he was on his way to Jerusalem, and all that would befall him there, did these events strike a fearful chord in Jesus, making him cry for himself?

Were his tears an expression of empathy with the sisters or, with his divine knowledge, did Jesus weep because he was about to call Lazarus back from a place which was really infinitely better than his earthly home?

Whatever the reason for the tears, they were unexpected, as was what Jesus did next; he called for the stone to be rolled away from the tomb and he summoned Lazarus to come out. In TV films and doubtless in our own imaginations, this is a glorious scene: Lazarus in spotless linen, emerges from the tomb, watched by people whose faces register a limited range of emotions; joy, wonder, bewilderment. There is probably heavenly music playing. In reality, Lazarus would be filthy, the most common facial expression of onlookers would be disgust at the stench coming from the tomb and in the place of heavenly music would be the sound of retching. God works miracles but they rarely occur in highly ordered, clinically sterile environments. God is at work where he is most needed - in all the messiness and indignity of broken human lives. If we want to work with God to bring about change, in our own lives, in our local communities or on a global scale, we must allow him to be undignified, to come into the mess and we must risk having to shed tears ourselves as we allow him to take control and act in unexpected but magnificent ways.

Prayer

Lord of all,

Thank you that you are with us in all the messiness, brokenness and chaos of our lives. Help us to allow you to take control and to call us afresh into new and glorious life with and in you, our Saviour and our God. Amen.

Tuesday, March 24th: Matthew 13,1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears^[a] listen!'

"Jesus went out ... and sat beside the sea." We're not told that he ate, prepared his next parable or even prayed. He simply sat - and I see him in my mind's eye sitting, hands clasped round his drawn-up knees, gazing out across the sea to the far horizon. He is totally still and completely content.

One of my favourite places is St Bees and most years I will go and stay in a caravan on St Bees Head overlooking the beach and an easy drive to some of the gems of the Lake District. One of the things I value most - apart from the natural beauty - is the enforced slow pace of life there. Internet access is, at best, intermittent; the cooker in the caravan is adequate but takes longer than mine at home; the lanes are too hilly and winding for me, never a fast driver anyway, to be even tempted to break the speed limit - and there is the ever present possibility of meeting livestock just round the next bend. Cows and sheep are never in a hurry! So for a week at least, life slows down and, like Jesus at the start of our reading, I am able to sit and gaze and do nothing else!

For Jesus, though, this moment of stillness was quickly interrupted and once again besieged by crowds, he resumed his ministry, telling the well-known parable of the sower.

Preachers and congregants alike often use this parable to try to analyse what type of soil they are, how effectively they are producing "crops" for God and perhaps, missing one vital point: while some seed was quickly pecked up or choked by weeds and thorns, there is no suggestion that the good seed sprouted quickly. Every farmer knows that it takes time to produce a good, healthy crop. In just the same way, spiritual harvest takes time. We cannot - or should not - expect to see instant results for our efforts. If we try to rush God's work, we are less likely to see it succeed. God has eternity, and although we must be active in his service, we must also allow him to set the pace!

There is one final piece of encouragement I hope you can take from this parable: the farmer scattered his seeds and some fell on unfit ground, bearing no harvest. But some fell in good soil and bore fruit. Not everything we try to do for God will achieve what we hope for. Some of our efforts will fail. BUT sometimes we will sow a seed somewhere, in some situation or in somebody's heart and it will bear fruit - possibly more than we will ever know. So don't be downhearted if you seem to be "hitting a brick wall" in your attempts to further God's Kingdom. You may not see the results - but God will, and he will honour you for it.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for times of activity and moments of stillness.

As we seek to serve you, help us not to be discouraged when our efforts seem fruitless. Give us faith to trust in you and your perfect timing. Amen.