

Get behind me...



You know when you see Geese flying in a V formation in the sky? I'm sure most of you know why they fly like that. There are two reasons ...

... firstly, it means as the leader cuts through the air, the others form the V shape to take advantage of the slipstream, and to have a rest for a time, from Way-finding, and from the sheer life-force needed to form that way.

... Secondly, it means that those behind can honk encouragement to the leader to strengthen them in their mission.

The mission then passes from leader to leader as the journey progresses to its destination.

It's an ancient instinct of the geese, formed on arduous and long migration journeys to get to better breeding and feeding sites in different seasons. Journeys that were tough, but life-preserving, and life-giving.

Many years ago, when I was a secondary school English teacher, I wrote a graphic poem¹ on this subject, deliberately written to amuse, entitled *what do you say when you honk from behind?*...

It's a good question. ...

¹ What is graphic poetry? No, it's not 'top-shelf' poems! At its core, graphic poetry is a dynamic hybrid art form where the visual arrangement of text and imagery is as important as the words themselves. It's not just about what the poem says, but how it *looks*. This means the choice of font, the spacing between letters and lines, the use of colour, the incorporation of illustrations, photographs, or abstract designs, and even the layout on the page, all contribute meaningfully to the poem's meaning and emotional resonance. ([What Is Graphic Poetry? The Ultimate Guide for Beginners Now - Sciencefix.blog](http://www.sciencefix.blog/2017/05/what-is-graphic-poetry-the-ultimate-guide-for-beginners-now/))

... How do we encourage and support each other; are we back-seat drivers, helpful passengers, or co-navigators?

... What sort of language do we use as we call out on the journey, and does it make the way smoother?

... How do we respond when it is our turn to be the Way-finder and the leader in our turn, and our chapter, and when God is calling us to use our talents and gifts in his mission of love?

I wonder if this is a good way of thinking about our reading today.

"Get thee behind me, Satan", says Jesus to Simon Peter.

It's a familiar part of our quotes and phrases, isn't it, and yet still quite shocking on the lips of Jesus. Especially to Simon in his love for Jesus, horrified at the prediction of pain and torture and death that Jesus is sharing with them... desperately trying to avoid it, protect him.

But perhaps... on the lips of Jesus – love incarnate – it doesn't quite mean the same as it sometimes does on ours...

...this rebuke is the loving voice calling us to reflect on which voices within us we are listening to, whom are we following – our way, or Jesus'?

Peter is listening to fear and anxiety, to the voice that tempts and whispers – suggesting an easier way, a shortcut... some way of getting out of the hard stuff ahead.

The trouble is, as Jesus knows, sometimes the only way... is through the cross. Sometimes, the only way through times of challenge and pain is to walk straight on the path of love, even if it leads through the valley of darkness, because it is only through facing into our storms that we can weather them, and only through facing the darkness that we can find the light that is stronger than it.

Way back at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, and Satan arrives to tempt him with easy routes; flashy miracles, and subjugating power. It would have been so easy for Jesus then to take an easier route of wielding his power and subjugating humanity than to face into the ministry ahead – no years of wandering the Galilean countryside, no frustrated reasoning with the Pharisees and Sadducees, no facing Herod's fears and jealousies... no passion, no cross, no dying.

But also... no beautiful relationships, no Mary of Magdala in the garden, no Peter at the beach, no weathering of lake storms together, no joy of watching the Syrophoenician woman at the well grow into confidence... no tears on Good Friday,

no overwhelming joy and love on Easter Day. Without the storms and the pain, no discovery of the stronger light and the deeper love.

Jesus resists Satan with scripture in the temptations at the start of his earthly ministry, and finally banishes him

"get thee hence, Satan!" or in some translations "begone!"

In our reading today, as that earthly ministry nears its closing, and Jesus turns his face toward the cross, it must feel like a flashback moment. Peter's love is leading him into fear and a desire to control the situation, and to tempt Jesus to take the easy route.

Yet, Jesus doesn't banish Peter, like he does Satan. He restores him. He names his fears as that of Satan's temptations... but....

... He doesn't tell him to *begone*. He tells him to *get behind him*.

Out there, in front, trying to control Grace, trying to find your own route, you follow Satan,

- but walk in my footsteps, I who am the Way² we all must walk in; re-know yourself for who you are (Peter, the Rock) and even yet all will be well.

It might remind you of the prophet Jeremiah, who said...

*Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.*

But you said, 'We will not walk in it'³

Sometimes we have to lay down our own sense of control, and our desire to take charge – to let Jesus lead the way.

*"For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world,
but forfeit their life?"*

Do we follow the short-cuts or our own worldly wisdom, or dare we step into the footsteps of Jesus, onto the risky paths, but those that lead to unexpected new life and hope?

² John 14: 6

³ Jeremiah 6:16

But perhaps there's another layer here too, like for the geese, both following the leader, but also playing our own part in the journey - Jesus our Brother wants Peter behind him, in companionship and solidarity. Jesus invites Peter into partnership on the journey. He invites him to consider what he *honks from behind*.

Get behind me, Peter.

Pray for me, support me, participate with me in this journey we are making together. Be ready to take up the baton, when it is your turn – *Peter the Rock, on whom I build my church*⁴.

Like those geese, flying in a V formation, each encouraging the other, each resting in the leader's way-finding and life-force, each ready to play their part when their chapter comes. It's the servant leadership of Christ, we are called to. To get behind – him and each other. Where the first are last, and the last first. Where everyone plays their own part, and all support the other, from kneeling at each other's feet, and lifting each other up.

Even – perhaps especially – when times seem hard and challenging and impossible.

'This must never happen to you', says Peter, looking at the Cross.

'Get behind me Satan', says Jesus, leading him through the Crucifixion to Easter Day and the breakfast on the beach.

I'll leave you with a reminder of those questions again -

How do we encourage and support each other; are we back-seat drivers, helpful passengers, or co-navigators? What sort of language do we use as we call out on the journey, and does it make the way smoother?

How do we respond when it is our turn to be the Way-finder and the leader in our turn, and our chapter, and when God is calling us to use our talents and gifts in his mission of love?

Get behind me again, says Jesus, and all will yet be well. *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*⁵. I go before you that *where I am, you may be also*⁶. More can be mended than you know⁷.

Get behind me, he says to us, and you will be the rock on which I build my church.

⁴ Matthew 16: 18

⁵ John 14: 6

⁶ John 14: 3

⁷ This memorable phrase (more can be mended than you know) is from the epic book Francis Spufford – 'Unapologetic'