

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 22 Year A 2020

The gospel placed before us today once more reminds us of the importance of looking around a particular gospel passage to more fully appreciate what the text is saying to us. The immediate context of what we hear today is the passage we heard last week. The two texts belong to each other like a renaissance diptych. Both panels of the diptych can be viewed and appreciated independently. But it is when they are taken together that we see the dynamic relationship between the two.

The dramatic background for these panels is Caesarea Philippi. Last week Fr James so helpfully explained how the particularity of that context - the very geographical setting - helped to highlight the force and power of Peter's strident confession: *you are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. That confession highlighted against the background of the pagan worship of the Canaanite god Baal, of the Hellenistic associations of the area with the god Pan, and then - in the very echo of the gospel itself, Herod the Great's nod to the imperial cult with the temple he built to the Divine Caesar. Against all this – pagan, Hellenistic, imperial competitors for the hearts and souls of men – the question is posed: *who do men say that I am*, giving way to the question of the ages, *but you, who do you say that I am*. With Simon recognising Jesus' true identity. Jesus proclaims Simon, the humble fisherman of Galilee, as Peter, *cephas* - the rock – and bestows him with the keys of the kingdom.

That is the first panel of our diptych. So, all the detail of this scene we now carry with us as we shift our gaze to the gospel today. Yes, the background is the same. The figures before us are the same. But in a way the scene couldn't be more different. This is perhaps the most dramatic turnaround in all of sacred scripture. One moment Peter is *the rock* on which the church is built. But then in almost the next breath, he is the *stumbling block* – satan. Satan literally meaning 'rock of obstruction'. Peter's confession that Jesus is truly the Christ is recognised as being a revelation that comes *from God*. But now that Peter objects to the shape Jesus' messianic ministry will take, he is told his thinking is that *from men*.

The adjacent panel highlighting Peter's confession of faith is really the highpoint in his career of faith, at least in the Gospels. So, today's gospel is his great come down. For Peter, yes, Jesus is the Christ. Yes, he is the long hoped-for Messiah. Yes, he is the Son of the living God. And yes, Jesus recognises this insight as a gift of the Father.

But in the gospel today it becomes unstuck for Peter when Jesus reveals what his Messiahship will look like, what *kind* of Christ he will be. And this, well this, Peter cannot accept: *'Destined to go to Jerusalem, to suffer grievously...to be put to death.'* Messiah, yes. But not *that* messiah. The promised, long hoped-for Christ, yes. But not *that* Christ. Peter rightly deserves Jesus' firm rebuke. Because he is simply seeking to divert Jesus from his God-given mission. He is trying to obstruct him. *No Lord. Don't go down that path! That cannot be your way!* And by implication that cannot be our way. Because the gospel today makes it quite clear. What Jesus' Messiahship means for him has implications about what it means for us. Peter here seeks to conform Jesus to his own idea of what the Christ is and what he will do. For Peter this does not include a trip to Jerusalem to face off with his persecutors, to suffer and die.

How often it is, though, that Peter's instinct to distance himself from the full and radical implications of Jesus' Messiahship is ours? In fact, it is almost the consistent pattern of the church's story to tame, and water down and compromise what Jesus reveals of himself. So, so often we cannot accept Jesus on his own terms. So often the old gods, the old claims to our allegiance lingering in the background claw their back. There is probably no figure in the entire history of the world that has been more co-opted and had more claimed for him and at the same time had the least claimed for him than Jesus of Nazareth. It is surely a testament to both the resilience of orthodox faith and to its truth that it can withstand so much of what is thrown at it. It surely a testament to the truth of Christ that *he* is able to withstand so many attacks to his person and his saving work. Any thing that was less true could hardly withstand so many grievous assaults.

The life of the Christian means that we must accept Christ on his terms. Part of those terms are presented to us today: of losing our lives so to save it, of renouncing ourselves, of taking up our cross and following him. We cannot imagine that to accept Christ's invitation here will leave *any* part of our life untouched. Our personal lives, our family lives, our work lives, our social and political lives, our moral and ethical lives. All parts of our lives are impacted if we accept Christ on his terms and follow *his* way. And this should extend of course to our live sunder COVID. Because there *should be* a unique, distinct Christian approach to the complex issues we face at this time. We look in vain for a voice from the churches in the public arena, at least in this city. But that doesn't mean we are let off the hook! It means *we* have to work harder to discern God's way in this! Even through some complex ethical questions this time puts to us.

This past week a Letter of Intent was signed between our government and AstraZeneca as the principal investment for a potential vaccine. However, some important ethical questions emerge because the vaccine in question makes use of a cell line cultured from an electively aborted human foetus. In response, the Anglican and Catholic archbishops of Sydney and Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Australia signed a letter asking the government to pursue similar arrangements for alternate vaccines that do not raise the same ethical concerns, so that we will have a choice when it comes to vaccination. You can only imagine the dismissive kind of responses that came from those who love to hate the church. But there are currently 167 vaccines being researched, many of which do not use foetal cells in their development. It is surely in the best interests of all of us that vaccination is widely taken up and this deadly disease defeated. But this will better be achieved if the vaccines available do not create an ethical quandary for faithful believers.

Undoubtedly there will be some you listening to this, even now, shifting uncomfortably in your seats at home. Firstly, because an Anglican preacher dared to mention abortion and its incompatibility with Christian life and teaching. And secondly, he dared suggest that the long hoped for vaccine - that silver bullet, that one thing that promised some return to normality – raises some serious difficulties for people of good faith. But this itself once more exposes the thinness of modern faith. How deceived we are to think a little vial of fluid might save us! How distanced we are from the path of authentic Christian witness if our hope is placed in anything other than God! If God is the true centre of our lives, and if his plan for the good ordering of this world means anything to us, then it means there may yet be one more cross we must be willing to bear. Our Lord reminds us today, *What will it gain a man if he wins the whole world and ruins his life?* The idea that we can steam roll over genuine ethical concerns borne from a sincere and conscientious position of faith is dangerous.

It is hard. Yes, it will grind and grate so many of the forces that are pushing us in other directions. But this is the cost, if we accept the Messiahship of Jesus on his terms not ours. Peter's mistake was to think that Jesus' messiahship would be on Peter's terms. We risk saying with Peter, yes you are the Christ, but only in these areas. Yes, I follow you, but I will determine the path. Yes, I will renounce myself, but on my terms not yours. But this approach is only to lay rock of obstruction upon rock. Allow Christ to speak to every aspect of our lives and on his terms, and we will find the life he promises. Amen.