

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 22 Year A 2017

It is surely a self-evident truth that we humans are all complex beings. All of us are a mix of good and bad, of good and noble motivations, as well as corrupt and sordid ones. We can destroy things as easily as we build them. We are all sinners but at the same time all of us have the potential to be saints. The figure of Peter is for many of us a reassuring presence in the Gospels. Apart from our Lord, he emerges as the most rounded, the most colourful character, showing us the wide range of human complexity. We read his part in the drama of the gospels and we can imagine a real man with both his good parts and his bad presented to us. He emerges as a man capable at once of profound insight, leadership and courage but also of frustrating stupidity and cowardice.

One of the most moving moments of my life was last year visiting the *scavi* – the excavation – of the tomb of Peter under the great basilica in Rome. Passing through the centuries as you descend, you settle upon the first century necropolis, the cemetery St Peter's is built over. There, three great monuments one built on top of the other, altar upon altar; the current high altar of St Peter, below that the altar of Constantine's basilica and below that the second century mausoleum over a first century tomb. In a niche Constantine had carved, and now in small Perspex boxes the bone fragments. Whose bones? Well, who knows. But almost certainly the bones from that first century tomb with its ancient graffiti, *here is Peter*.

His the faith, and his the martyrs death which inspired the towering monuments over his resting place. He, the humble Galilean fisherman who come good. But more importantly, his the faith that forms the apostolic foundation of the church. His the faith which inspired our Lord's response which heard last week, *you are Peter on this rock I will build my church*.

But it is a mixed story. Peter is a complex character. And so almost in the same breath – at least in the same chapter as Matthew tells it - even as Peter is declared *the rock* on which the church is built, he is then called satan, the *rock of stumbling*. Satan, simply meaning the adversary, the one who obstructs or causes to stumble. How high Peter falls! From the mountain-top experience just previously of recognising Jesus as *the Christ, Son of the living of God*. To Peter dismissing Jesus' destiny to suffer and die, earning him the stern rebuke. Not simply a foundation stone. But a stone of obstruction.

All this simply highlights how far Peter and the other disciples have yet to go to comprehend what Jesus' messiahship will mean. The rest of the gospel portion today, then, sees Jesus remind the disciples not only his own fate, but the fate of all those who follow after him. Jesus tells his disciples he is now heading to Jerusalem. That is the path he must follow. But to be a disciple means also to walk that road, to follow after him, literally to *walk in his tracks*. Now unfortunately, centuries of talking about 'the cross' has deadened us to the radicality of such a suggestion. In the world of the gospel the horrors of crucifixion would have been familiar to most readers. Now, for the gospel writer, it is not so much a case that believers themselves would be subject to that kind of death, though we might note for Peter at least this was the case. But the point here is that each will have to confront a measure of suffering as the price for being the kind of messiah Jesus is. Each will have his or her own cross to bear.

Peter learnt to accept Christ's claims, to trust him. Without denying the particularities of character, the uniqueness of his God-given personality, he had to let go of some things some old ideas, some unhelpful ways of living, so he could truly walk, indeed *literally* walk in Christ's steps. Of its essence, Christian life – if we are going to take it seriously, and not play at religion, play at being Christian – is about forming our lives, our natures and our characters to Christ's. To walk his way, to follow in his steps means we do not walk our way, assert our way or insist on *our* path. Not that there is just one way to do this. There are many legitimate and authentic ways in which to follow Christ. To be a Christian is not a case of constraining ourselves to an imposed uniformity. It is not a case of a one size fits all approach. Paul indicates as much in the epistle reading today, highlighting the diversity of the body of Christ. But ultimately, we affirm it is *Christ's* body. It is *his* way, *his* footsteps we seek to follow.

The epistle reading really expresses in a different way what lay at the heart of the gospel text. In the gospel, we have an image of falling into step behind Christ, so that his way becomes our way. In a similar vein, in the letter to the Romans, speaks of being united to Christ and of the transformative life that come from faith in Christ. Today's reading gives us idea of what that transformed life looks like. And just as the gospel points us to the costliness, the seriousness, the deadly costliness, of following him, so too Paul speaks of sacrifice, the giving of oneself. Following Christ, walking in his way, being conformed to Christ will cost.

This is further emphasised by Paul by telling us, *Do not be conformed to this world*, or in other translations, this age. We have to let go identities and securities and status and privileges and even acceptance that so often we hang on to. In the moral, ethical and political questions of the day, the church cannot be true to itself, or its calling, if it simply reflects the culture back on itself. Instead, it becomes something of a parody, like a child desperate to it impress the most popular kid in school by whatever means; thinking that the only way it can be relevant or attract itself to the world around is by playing up to its demands. This, of course, can only ever be a game of catch up for the culture will quickly tire of its pet cause and move on to the next item on its agenda.

Be not conformed to this age. The sphere the church authentically inhabits is the one which must of its very essence, it's very nature, look beyond, above, *elsewhere* for its centre of gravity. To simply look here below, we will be pulled into this earthly gravity. Of course, there will be clash. Of course, there will be a rub, places of significant grating, if we align ourselves with Christ's path. Let us not pretend otherwise. The world we inhabit, of *its* nature, will seek to organise itself along different lines. It will ask different questions, have different priorities. It will necessarily be limited to the here and now. But for us, Christ is our Sun, if you like. He is our orbit by which the gravity of our lives revolves. He who is both the object of our desire and the path by which we journey to him. And it is love of him which pulls us into his orbit, which will enable us to overcome the forces which press hard against us.

My brothers and sisters, we can only fulfil our Lord's invitation to follow him, to be a true disciple and allow our footsteps to fall into his, to allow ourselves to be united with him, conformed to him, to bear the cost, if we love him. Otherwise, what are we doing?! The exquisite opening line of the portion from Jeremiah today points us toward this. Frustratingly poorly translated in what you have heard today. Much better, *O Lord you have enticed me and I was enticed.* Or, *You have seduced me Lord, and I have let myself be seduced.* Jeremiah the great prophet who laments the destruction of Jerusalem, who sees the annihilation of his people the desecration of the temple, who knew the true cost of following God and felt as few of us would have felt the pressing hard of one culture in against another. But still, allowed himself to be seduced, enticed by the Lord. The price of discipleship will soon be asked of many of us. We will only be true to Christ and his way, if we give ourselves to love of him who so loved us. Amen.