

Waiting on holy ground
a sermon preached on the
Thirteenth Sunday after pentecost
3 September 2017
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by the reverend Helen Creed

the lections: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

Our gospel reading today is part of a sequence in Matthew which sees Peter going from being a “rock” to a “stumbling block” in what seems to be the blink of an eye. The story just before our reading, that we heard last week, is one of the high-points in the gospel: Jesus and his disciples are in the region of Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter makes the bold statement: You are the Messiah”. Jesus responds by calling him a rock on which [he] will build [his] church. But, as is the way with Peter, and to the comfort of us all, his insight doesn’t last very long. Indeed, in this morning’s story Jesus calls Peter a “stumbling block”, a block with the potential to de-rail the whole mission.

Peter is greatly disturbed by Jesus speaking openly about his destiny: a destiny that is about being “raised on the third day”, but that will also involve “great suffering” and being “killed”. So Peter takes Jesus aside, out of public view and “rebukes him”. Jesus could not be clearer in his response, he turns, and rebukes Peter in the strongest terms: “Get behind me Satan”.

Clearly, from Jesus’ perspective, this is no small matter - there is something diabolical in Peter’s attempt to make sure Jesus never submits to suffering. At the beginning of his gospel, Matthew tells the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, a scene that ends with Jesus saying the words, “Away with you Satan!” Our story today is much later in the gospel, but it is clear that Peter’s protest has thrown Jesus back into that wilderness, with all its temptations. Peter is demanding that Jesus reject the experiences he knows are coming, a stance which is effectively asking Jesus to reject God.

The series of sayings which follow this story represent Jesus’ attempt to teach Peter, and the disciples, how they might find real true life, rather than settle for something flimsy. What Jesus signals here is that our efforts to find true life are jeopardized when we reject some kinds of experience (i.e. negative), when we refuse to face realities, when we are determined to hang on to what we have.

In fact, the truest possibilities of life arise, Jesus says, when we lose. It is not that there is anything wrong with the enjoyments and comforts and successes, it’s just that the way to fuller, deeper, more abundant life, is not through these things.

Jesus says “if any want to become my followers” (in other words, if any want to participate in my kind of life, abundant life), “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Let’s stop for a moment and look at this phrase, “take up your cross”. How are we to understand this today? What does it mean for us?

There is a Good Friday tradition in the Philippines when young men submit to being nailed to a cross, as a sign of devotion to Jesus. Do I need to say, I don’t think this is what Jesus means. I also don’t think Jesus is urging us to **actively seek out** suffering, rejection and death. And he certainly doesn’t mean that we should tolerate situations

where we are being abused in any way, as if tolerating abuse is some kind of Christian virtue.

I think that **taking up your cross**, is to do with accepting your life as it presently is, rather than spending time longing for a past that has been taken from you, or dreaming of a future full of the things that will make you happy. It's about trusting that whatever the circumstances of your life may be, whatever lonelinesses might descend on you, whatever reversals of fortune come your way, the way forward is to take up the challenging circumstances, rather than avoid or run away from them. It is about saying with as much hope as you can muster "your will be done".

Going back to our gospel story – "Your will be done" is not something that Peter could say to Jesus on this particular day. His words to Jesus – "God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you" – are a kind of protest, aren't they. He cannot imagine that Jesus could reach a point of accepting this terrible rejection.

But Jesus is not protesting – he is totally clear about the inevitability of the days ahead. And what he needs, at this point, it seems to me, is a companion who will help him to face what is to come, rather than bang on about how unacceptable it all is. Someone who can also hold on to the hope that this place of suffering might also turn out be a place of rising again.

There are many different ways we could choose to reflect on this story for ourselves. This morning I would like to spend a little time exploring what it has to say to us about how we can be with people who are facing rejection and death, in all the ways those realities can happen in our lives. How can we be with people who are facing the end of a marriage, public disgrace, a dreaded diagnosis, months in detention, the loss of a partner, the loss of a home, the end of a dream? Our first instinct might be similar to that of Peter – to say, no this can't happen to you, this is not acceptable, there must be something you can do, someone you can call upon. And there is much to be said for honest protest, for speaking however we need to speak about the loss, even railing against it.

But there is also a time, isn't there, for finishing with protest – a time for going on to the more difficult task of being with another in a situation that is not going to go away, a situation that cannot be simply reversed. Sometimes an illness cannot be cured, a marriage cannot be saved, retrenchment cannot be avoided. It is at these points, that we need companions who can hold fast to the promise that we see in the life of Jesus. This is the promise of transfiguration, or resurrection, to use two Christian words. The promise that this dreadful event is actually not the end, but rather part of a most sacred mystery – God working invisibly in all the terror and tragedy that our lives sometimes become, never abandoning us, and never letting one good thing be lost. Jesus saw rejection and suffering on the horizon; he also held to the hope of rising. We too can hold to such hope, hope that might help us to see that this place of pain is also holy ground, a place of encounter with the one true God, a place not to rush away from, but where we need to remove our sandals and wait.

I really like the phrase in our OT reading this morning about how God has "observed the misery of [his] people" and has come down to deliver them to a **"good and broad land"**. May we, in our lives as followers of Christ, continue to hope and pray that this ancient promise of being brought to a "good and broad land" is also a promise for us.

The Lord be with you.