

Matthew 16:21-27 – Trinity 12 – 30/8/2020

In our reading today we join Jesus' journey to the cross at the point where he begins to show his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and then be raised from the dead.

We see some behaviours and reactions played out that actually we might recognise in ourselves even today – not least some overreaction which cause us to respond in a fearful and insecure way – have you ever had that scene with a loved one – a pet perhaps – or someone in your care when they seem to be about to do something dangerous or so we think – *'don't drive too fast – don't go running over there – don't run with those scissors etc etc* This reaction that happens as a result of a fear motivated by the need to protect them – and that is probably what was going on with Peter when his beloved friend began to talk about his impending suffering and death.

The word 'show' that is used by Matthew to speak to us can be taken in two ways - that Jesus is making something visible - available for viewing - such as the physical journey that he is taking - and also that he is explaining - by foretelling his death and resurrection - the spiritual implications that his mission stands for - how these events will point the way to show that his mission is indeed that of Messiah.

That Jesus now "shows" (rather than "teaches" as in Mark) his disciples what is about to happen marks this event also as one of revelation and as a gift of special knowledge now being imparted to this disciple community. At the heart of that special revelation is the clear witness that Jesus' identity as Messiah is integrally tied, even constituted in the necessity ("must," 16:21) of his suffering and death in Jerusalem.

Perhaps this is why Jesus rebukes Peter so harshly, saying to him, 'Get behind me, Satan!' (v.23) – Peter is not simply rejecting the headline, a statement that Jesus is going to suffer and die, he is rejecting (or ignoring) the deeper story of God's purposes that Jesus has set forth. In essence, out of fear for his friend and all that he believes about him, Peter is rejecting the way of the cross, and there is nothing surprising in this, since the way of the cross remains a continual challenge to all who follow Jesus. The human path of success and power often seems more attractive, and also more logical and reasonable. Peter's cry of 'This must never happen to you' (v.22) sounds like loyalty and faith, especially in the light of his earlier confession, but it is shown to be completely wrong.

We have to remember that to take up our cross is to take up a cross like the one Jesus bore - to deny ourselves - to be willing to lose our earthly lives - seeking to satisfy our earthly wants and our desires, imposing our opinions and our judgements on others without seeing the reality of our own behaviours.

It can sometimes be tough in the world when we believe in countercultural ways of looking at things and so Church is a place where, as fellow followers of Jesus, we need to encourage each other in our times of pain as well as celebrating with each other when things go well.

In the days of the early followers of Jesus, there was nothing metaphorical about a cross: it was the way that the Roman authorities executed many hundreds of criminals and troublemakers, in order to keep the nation they had conquered under control.

I don't think Jesus calls us to deny our humanity but to commit to following him while fully accepting how vulnerable our humanity will be if we choose pick up crosses and follow him. Jesus was willing to be God's Messiah - anointed one - knowing the violence that could be done to his body as a consequence of pursuing justice, love and peace instead of the privileges of empire.

The invitation to 'take up their cross and follow me' (v.24) is therefore not an invitation to scan our own experience for something painful that we might then call 'my cross', but to walk with Jesus in his perplexing vulnerability, refusing to condemn others or to assert our own righteousness.

God's power is revealed not in walks through the porticos of power, but through the dusty alleys of weakness and misery. That is where Jesus walked. That is where he leads us to walk. That is where he strengthens us to bear the burdens of discipleship. It is his burden we take upon our shoulders. It is his strength that bears the weight. We do nothing on our own, but he can do much through us.

Let us remember Jesus's challenge - which was also his promise – God has a plan – don't let human-based fears come between us and God... Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it - let us pray that we become even more willing to pick up our cross - to become strong in our weakness - so God might be able to do much through us in a vulnerable and challenging world....

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