

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist

Lent 2

Sunday 28 February 2021, 10am

St Mark 8.31-38

Preacher

Canon Simon Tatton-Brown

“Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering...” I’m not surprised Peter told Jesus “this must not happen to you.” Are you? I’ve heard lots of sermons explaining why Peter might have said this. A suffering messiah? Where do you read this in the prophecies? You must be joking, Lord!

But I think it’s more likely Peter was just frightened. Think about it. If Jesus was going to be “rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed”, it would only be a matter of time before they came after Peter and the others. Peter was right of course. That’s what they did.

One of the challenges of Lent is how we respond. I’m not thinking about how much chocolate we’re going to give up or whether we should sign up to a Lent course. I’m thinking of the challenge Jesus throws down to us: to take up our cross and follow him.

When I was a 20 year-old student the preacher one Evensong told us about his work running a Home Office probation hostel. At the end of the

sermon he invited any of us listening to come and stay there during the vacation to learn more. And I knew straightaway that this meant me.

The trouble was that it was way out of my comfort zone. I could remember all too well how the rough boys from the secondary modern had teased me in my smart prep school uniform, and I didn't want to go there again. So before I could chicken out, I posted my letter accepting his invitation.

Peter chickened out. Before the cock crew, just as Jesus had predicted.

While I may not have chickened out that night in the college chapel, there've been many occasions since then when I have. And in LGBTI+ History Month (albeit on the last day of that month) it's perhaps appropriate that I tell you about one of them.

The year is 1989. There's a new disease on the march, more deadly than Covid-19 because then it was invariably fatal. The tabloid press called it the gay plague, and although it was now two

years since Princess Diana had famously shaken hands with an AIDS patient, the prejudice, the stigma, and the fear were still there.

I'd just moved parish when I got a phone call to say that my friend Martin was in the local general hospital. I'd got to know Martin in my previous parish. He wasn't a member of my congregation. He was Roman Catholic. But he'd had a very public falling out with his parish priest in the middle of Sunday mass when he'd stood up in his pew and challenged what he considered homophobic comments from the pulpit. That's when Martin started coming to my eight o'clock service and we'd become friends. But Martin was one of the first gay men in Manchester to be diagnosed with AIDS.

I visited Martin a number of times in the hospital before he died. He was in an isolation ward. I had to wear a plastic apron and sanitise my hands on leaving – all nonsense of course as Princess Diana had shown. A few weeks later one of his friends phoned to say the funeral was to be in his Roman Catholic church. Would I be there?

I was scared. Not for Martin, or anything to do with the funeral. I was scared for me. For I was a vicar in a same-sex relationship, attempting to hide it from my bishop and from my new congregation. It wasn't normal to go back to your old parish. My presence at the funeral could easily give me away. I knew I ought to go: to pray for Martin, to support the people who loved him, to stand up for what I believed. But I made a lame excuse, and stayed away.

St Luke tells us that after the cock crowed the third time, the Lord looked on Peter. I wonder if that look reminded Peter of the words of Christ we heard this morning: "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed." Those were the words haunting my thoughts as I put down the phone.

It's not for nothing that Christ teaches us to pray "Do not bring us to the time of trial". (Our translation the Lord's prayer, 'lead us not into temptation' is not what it's really about.) Christ understands our human nature only too well. After all, isn't deliverance from his time of trial

what he prays for in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asks for the cup to be taken from him?

A few weeks later, when he next looks on Peter, at the Sea of Galilee after the Resurrection, it's Peter who feels ashamed. Christ looks on him again. He calls Peter to the beach, to eat with him and commissions him afresh.

I'm sure we're all familiar with the Quo Vadis story and how tradition has it that Peter's story ends in Rome in the year 65, with Peter fleeing from the Emperor Nero's persecution, and how Peter again is met by the Risen Christ, and turns back to face the certainty of suffering and death.

What gave him courage this time? How come Peter overcame his fears? My guess is that it's his fellow Christians who gave him the courage to go back, who mediated God's grace to him. For Peter wasn't alone this time. He was part of a community, a community which had bonded under his leadership, a community which knew about his frailties and his shortcomings, and still loved him. Many of them had already gone to their deaths, and their faithfulness was now beck-

oning Peter back. And although I've not always been aware of it, I've also been surrounded and upheld by the love of my fellow Christians.

Six or seven years after Martin died I was in a meeting with the vicar of my previous parish. He told me that soon after he'd arrived there his churchwardens, my churchwardens, had taken him aside for a quiet word. "There's something we need to tell you Bob, just in case it comes up. We don't think it will, but just in case. You see, all the time Simon was vicar here, he had his boy friend living with him in the vicarage. We all knew of course. It wasn't a problem. Nobody minded. So we didn't say anything."