

### **The Cost of Discipleship**

How quickly things can change! It's just a year since Beryl and I first attended Christ Church. Could any of us at the beginning of September last year have possibly imagined the pandemic that has swept the world, that has had us in lockdown for several months, that has crashed the economy, sent tens of thousands of our fellow citizens to an early grave and, as lockdown slowly eases, means that our Sunday worship today is a very different experience from a year ago. No choir – at least physically – no singing, no sharing the peace, no wine at communion. The list of strange and unwelcome changes could go on. But rather, let's look at another dramatic and unwelcome change. Put yourself in the position of Peter, and as you do so think not only of the gospel reading we have just heard, but also back to last Sunday's reading. There we heard Peter (then still called Simon) confidently answering Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" with the words "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God". And Jesus gave his answer an encouragingly warm reply, renamed Simon as Peter, the rock, the one on whom the future church would be built. Peter must have been on cloud nine! But he hadn't really understood what he was saying. He was still thinking in terms of a triumphal Messiah, someone who would drive out the Roman occupiers, someone who would restore Israel and establish an earthly kingdom - and would no doubt appoint Peter as his Chancellor of the Exchequer. So when, as we hear in today's reading, Jesus starts explaining to his disciples how things would really be, hinting at arrest, suffering, Peter (as he now is), emboldened by the earlier events, start arguing. And he who had so recently been described as the rock on which the church will be built is now described as Satan, a temptation and a stumbling block to Jesus. What a reverse! What was going through Peter's mind as all this happened? Was he as disorientated as many of us feel we have become over these recent months of upheaval? What did he make of the teaching that followed, that spelt out the risks and the cost of continuing as a disciple, a follower of Jesus? For Peter and his fellow disciples it was all pretty imminent. Before long they would be put to the test, one of them would betray Jesus, Peter would deny Jesus three times and they would all run away. We know how the story pans out. And we also know about the crucified Jesus being raised, meeting his shocked disciples, restoring them – even Peter who had denied him - and commissioning them to continue his work.

And like it or not we are the fruits of that commission, 2000 years later. We are those who have heard the good news of Jesus, who have put our trust in him, who have become the next links in that chain of commission and discipleship. And so we too are confronted in this gospel passage with the challenge of

service and discipleship. In fact all three of our readings this morning address different aspects of this challenge.

Even in the prophet Jeremiah, several hundred years before Christ, we see the theme of the cost of true service. Jeremiah's experience of receiving God's call was that the initial sense of joy gave him the motivation to pursue it, but that gave way to pain and distress, he began to think he had been deceived or even abandoned by the God who issued the call. And that has often been the pattern experienced by those who hear God's call. The reasons for this distress are varied: it may be that others refuse to recognise the call, or oppose it, or even that what the call is about causes distress to the one who has to fulfil it. In Jeremiah's case, all three elements seem to be present. His eyes are opened to the sins of his people and to God's imminent judgement, and he is told to declare it. The message not only grieves the Prophet himself, it arouses opposition and hatred in those who hear it, resulting in his feeling rejected and abandoned by all, including God. But Jeremiah learnt that God doesn't abandon those he calls, and perseverance, even in the face of opposition, leads to vindication, as we heard in the closing verses of that reading.

And that takes us to the difficult words in the Gospel passage. There have been hints in Matthew's narrative before now, concerning Jesus's eventual fate, but it is not until the disciples have recognised him for who he is that he starts to talk openly about it. Peter, is horrified, he cannot comprehend that this is what messiahship means. But Jesus refuses to be bound by triumphalist notions of messiahship. He has to prove himself and be recognised as Messiah before he dare speak openly about his death, because otherwise he would have no credibility. But, once he has proved himself, he can lead his disciples on from the known to the unknown and expand their understanding of him and his mission.

In the context of Jesus' discussion of his own death, his earlier words (Mt 10.38-9) about those who follow him taking up their cross and losing their life in order to save it have a new seriousness. Maybe it's not just a metaphor. Discipleship is certainly not for the faint hearted; but it will be rewarded. For John the Baptist – whose beheading was remembered yesterday – the way of discipleship was costly. For many of the early disciples, including Peter himself, likewise. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die" wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Nazi prison. In his case this was literally the case, hanged by the Nazis a month before the end of WWII. Archbishops Oscar Romero in El Salvador or Janani Luwum in Uganda, in our own lifetimes were victims of corrupt politicians opposed to their stance for the gospel. And if you have read the latest USPG magazine you may have noticed the article describing how the pandemic has provided cover for an escalation in the existing militarisation and human rights abuses in some countries.

Reports from the Philippines are especially disturbing, where a violent suppression of civil society is underway. Indigenous groups and those who stand in solidarity with them - notably the churches - have been subject to online vilification, threats and arrests against the backdrop of a 'shoot to kill' policy. The cost of discipleship in such places is high.

The autumn Pilgrim series starting in October is planning to explore what it might mean to us to live as Resurrection People. Paul doesn't use that phrase but in Romans explores the same concept - to die and rise with Christ. Our reading from Romans 12 is part of his exploration of some of the practical consequences of being risen with Christ, in terms of how we relate both to friends (hard enough) and enemies (very much harder). I can imagine that with such questions, and those about the cost of discipleship discussed in today's Gospel it could prove to be a challenging study series. Hopefully we will rise to the challenge and join in the exploration.

But to close, going back to putting ourselves in the position of Peter. We know how easily we, like him, get things wrong, how easily we don't see what God is doing and where he is working, how easily we don't listen properly to what he is saying, what he is calling us to do, how easily we distort things through the lens of our own perceptions and wishes. Perhaps this is because we do not allow ourselves the opportunity to listen? I leave with you the image in verse 16 of the OT reading 'Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart'. What a graphic image to take away with us: eating God's words- feeding on them, being nourished by them.