

Introduction

I wonder what you would choose, if I asked you to choose a favourite story about Jesus' ministry. Let's discount the Christmas and Easter stories because we all hold those very dear, but what about the stories that show us Jesus interacting with his old neighbours from his hometown, with his friends and with the crowds and the authorities? Is there a story or a character that enables you to imagine yourself right there, listening to Jesus, speaking to him, being his friend?

For me there are two characters that give me that sense of being right there: Martha and Peter. Both of them are 'doers' who love Jesus and throw themselves into following him with energy and courage. They both recognize him as the Messiah, the Saviour sent by God, but at times they both completely mess up! They misinterpret situations, barge in and try to sort things out in their own way or are confused, hurt or angry. And I am just like them! So I can imagine myself in Peter's shoes/sandals when I read today's Gospel reading.

Exploring the Passage

It's such a beautiful thing, in the section of Mark's gospel just before this reading Jesus is being hailed by the crowd as all sorts, but in a quiet moment he asks his friends "But what do you think? Who do you think I really am?" And Peter speaks up "You are the Messiah!" He gets that so right, but as is often the case in Mark's stories, Jesus tells his friends not to tell anyone. So, we can see why when Jesus starts to talk openly about suffering and rejection, dying and rising again, Peter is confused and outraged, and perhaps more than a little frightened. He has given up everything to follow God's Chosen One in anticipation of freedom not defeat. How could what Jesus is talking about possibly be part of God's plan to restore Israel? Peter can't make sense of it. It doesn't fit with any road map to liberation that he can imagine so he tries to pull Jesus back from the brink. And Jesus, being human and therefore more than a little frightened by what his Father has called him to face, is outraged and rebukes Peter for trying to draw him onto an easier path. How must Jesus have felt to have his friend speak in the same terms as Satan in the wilderness? And how confused must Peter have felt? One minute thinking he had understood Jesus and was part of the inside group with 'the biggest secret ever' to keep, and next being roundly told that he had no idea what was going on and, metaphorically at least, being pushed out of the way.

I wonder, have you ever experienced that sort of visceral confusion because though you acted or spoke with the best of intentions, you got it so very wrong? My guess is that for those of us who are 'doers' this is a totally recognizable situation. But it seems to me that this reading is timely for all of us in that there is a lot of this sort of confusion in public life and discourse at the moment. I take Sir Lindsay Hoyle at his word, his face suggests genuine

anguish, so the chaos in Parliament over the vote on amendments to the call for a ceasefire/humanitarian ceasefire/pause to fighting in Gaza is one example of well-meaning actions turning out to be fatally flawed. Fake news, social media misuse and abuse, the power of money in the media, all these leave us confused about the truths of any situation reported to us and can lead us to say and do things that are misguided, or to say and do nothing when we should. I watch the news from the US and wonder how confused many committed Christians who support Republican values must be. And I'll hold my hands up here and admit that I am so concerned to be neither antisemitic nor islamophobic that I avoid addressing the confusion and do not express any view about the Israel-Palestine situation though I am so deeply angered and grieved by the loss of life and hope on both sides.

Today's gospel reading doesn't offer us any easy solutions to the messy business of following Jesus through 'confusions', but it does show us Jesus offering a way forward.

We read "Jesus called the crowd, with his disciples, and said to them 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"

The first thing that I noticed is that Jesus doesn't only offer a way forward to his closest disciples, he offers it to everyone! All that follows is not only for the people there at the time, it is for you and me, whether we have been Christians for many years, or wouldn't describe ourselves as Christians now; whether we have been coming to church since we were born, or have come to faith later in life; whether we are full of questions or complacency, doubt, or faith, Jesus offers us a way of living in the world that safeguards our souls throughout eternity. He teaches that it is in unswerving loyalty and commitment to him that we find our way. The call to self-denial and self-sacrifice in his service would have reminded his first listeners of the language of the Roman occupying forces who promised peace on the basis that everyone served the Emperor with absolute devotion. That may be uncomfortable for us, and must have been shocking to them, but it certainly brings home the idea that Jesus calls us to set aside our tribal and political loyalties and become full citizens of God's Kingdom so that we may enjoy life in the Spirit now and for eternity. That life, our 'best life' is lived under God's law, summarised by Jesus

³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.^[a] ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'^[b] There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12: 30-31

The death of Alexei Navalny last week has reminded us that even in our time, people die for their political views, beliefs, or allegiances. (Let's never forget our Christian brothers and sisters persecuted in other parts of the world. Open Doors have useful prayer resources.) But here in Tidenham Parish we are unlikely to be called upon to do the same. However, today's passage warns us not to try to save face by holding back parts of our life. (Money, sex and power are areas where Christians so easily swerve away from total loyalty to Christ.) Whatever we might gain in worldly terms erodes the peace and confidence that Jesus has

bought for us when he held nothing back and gave his life on the cross. The clarity we gain by being whole heartedly loyal and obedient to Jesus' call is compromised and we invite the potential for confusion and shame.

But what will this look like in a Christian life faithfully lived day by day?

Peter could not see how the future mapped out by Jesus fitted with the prophecies of a Messiah who would save his people, but Jesus makes it clear that justice and righteousness will still be established under God's rule. That's so important for us as we seek to be faithful in worship and love in the face of the turmoil in the world. We, like Peter, may not see how we will move from A to B, but God's promise holds true. Love has overcome death, and the hope of resurrection is ours in Jesus. Keeping this in mind, holding it in our hearts and feeling it in our gut all becomes possible through worship. As we read the scriptures and reflect on them together, sing, pray and encourage one another, our experience and knowledge of God's character grows and with the enabling of the Holy Spirit we grow and flourish so that our perspective is held true and steady, despite the confusion of the world today. We are then so much better equipped to play our part in the mission of the church and to love our neighbours as though they are our own family.

Something to ponder in the silence.

What would it mean for me to love God with every fibre of my being? How would that affect my experience of going to church?

What could I do this week to love my neighbour as though they are my own kith and kin?