

## **Matthew 16:21-28 Travelling together**

In last week's Gospel reading you may remember Jesus asked the disciples that all important question "Who do you say I am?" Peter gained his place at the top of the class, he got the star of the week award for recognising Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He was commended by Jesus, "Peter you are a rock and on this rock I will build my church, and I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven." Can you just imagine how Peter must have felt? His chest puffed up with pride, for once he had got it right. So many times before he had got things wrong, made blunders and put his foot in it, but this time he got it right and Jesus praised him for his understanding. He is the first to grasp and confess who Jesus really is and the importance of his mission.

### **Today's reading**

But moving on to today's reading we find a marked contrast. Jesus starts to speak to his disciples for the first time about why in a short while it will be necessary for him to suffer a terrible death in Jerusalem. Quite rightly the disciples are shocked by what Jesus tells them, nowhere in their understanding of the Old Testament scriptures was any suggestion that the Messiah would die a shameful death of a common criminal. The Messiah is supposed to

be the victor, like the great battle leaders of old, the one who triumphs by destroying the enemy and leading his people in victory. So, when Peter voices his concern, far from commending him this time, Jesus rebukes him and he is told "Get behind me Satan! You are an obstacle in my way." I guess at that point Peter must have been devastated. Only moments ago Jesus praised Peter and gave him one of the highest honours he could have possessed, but now Jesus condemns him in the strongest way possible, just for showing his natural human compassions towards Jesus.

### **Unfair**

It all seems a bit unfair for Peter, he was trying to affirm Jesus' role as the Messiah, the victor, and yet he hasn't got it right. Peter has not quite understood what Jesus the Messiah came to achieve. He sees the role in the way most people understood it; to establish a politically independent Israel in which the Jewish people could worship their God in freedom. But that was not what Jesus' role as the Messiah was to be, Peter has not grasped the depth of Jesus' work of dealing with the sin of all humanity, nor the lengths he must go in order to achieve it. So, ironically, Peter's care and concern for Jesus becomes synonymous with that story of Jesus' temptation by Satan in Matthew chapter 4 as he utters those words "get behind me Satan". The man who had been called "the Rock", is now

referred to as a "stumbling-block": a rock stuck in the middle of the path of what Jesus is trying to achieve.

Right at the beginning of this passage Jesus is quite certain of his future suffering, he knows it will happen and there is no doubt in his mind. "I **must** go to Jerusalem and suffer much" he says. He knows it will happen, somehow part of God's bigger plan, but Jesus doesn't go into the reasons why he must suffer, the fact of his suffering is sufficient for the time being, even though that may have left the disciples wondering what he was talking about. And then he goes on to tell the disciples what that means for them, "If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their own life will lose it; but who ever loses their life for my sake will find it". I guess those words were equally puzzling for the disciples, at that time they had no idea of Jesus' suffering, no idea he would be put to death on a cross, no idea that they themselves would be subjected to ridicule, persecution and suffering. What was Jesus talking about? No wonder the disciples were puzzled and confused. If Jesus is the Messiah then surely in his victory his most trusted followers would share that victory by gaining a place of honour? So, what is all this talk of self denial, taking up crosses and losing lives to gain another one?

## **Cross**

I do wonder if the disciples had a better idea than us of what it meant to take up their cross, to give up their life in order to follow Jesus? In our time and culture those challenging words of Jesus can be lost. People often speak of "a cross I have to bear", as some kind of mild annoyance or discomfort, something we have to "put up" with. But that doesn't do justice to Jesus' strange and frightening invitation. We are some distance from what the disciples experienced, "taking up their cross" would have a completely different meaning, especially as they witnessed the barbaric act of crucifixion in their culture. The cross signifies not just an agonising death but also shame and humiliation and so Jesus' invitation is certainly strange, and probably more so for us. Can you imagine the reaction if I were to say, "In order to be a true follower of Jesus you have to give your whole life over as an act of self-sacrifice, and not just in a way which means a mild inconvenience, but to give your life even to the point where you are willing to die."

I'm sure you'll agree it's not a very attractive invitation, especially where the idea of sacrificing our independence, our individuality, our freedom to do as we please is completely alien to our culture. Isn't the call to give up everything a bit whacky? Isn't it asking a bit

too much, a bit too demanding? Yet, isn't that the truth of what Jesus is saying?

### **Hardest**

I've always said one of the hardest prayers to pray with deep sincerity and honesty is: "Lord take my life and do with it as you will." It takes a great deal of courage to pray that short prayer and to really mean it. It is a prayer of self-sacrifice, a prayer of submission, a prayer which demands you to put aside all aspirations and ambitions and to place your whole life in the hands of God. It is one of the hardest prayers to pray because it demands so much and yet isn't that what Jesus calls us to do?

In following Jesus we are called to a life of transformation, to submit ourselves to God's will, to change from what we are into what God wants us to be. And that's not easy, because transformation and change is never easy, especially when it involves sacrifice and giving up the things we might value, and in many ways that's why we cannot do this journey alone.

### **Greenbelt**

Last weekend I was at Greenbelt, the Christian arts and music festival. Greenbelt has now been going for 41 years and back in the

70's it was predominantly a music festival but over the years it has evolved and undergone its own transformation. Music and arts are still at the heart of Greenbelt, but now it also has an extensive programme of talks. I enjoy Greenbelt because it isn't frightened to tackle the awkward issues Christians face in living out our faith in this difficult world. Greenbelt has always been considered a bit 'left of field', but I'm quite happy to go and listen openly to what people may have to say about same-sex marriage or to hear views from other faiths, or to listen to other issues of faith and justice I may not hear elsewhere. Listening to those other 'voices' is about change and transformation, it's about hearing something different, opening my mind to a different understanding of God, and having my own faith and understanding challenged by those different views. And whether you think that's right or wrong, you can only be changed and transformed by actually being open to having your own thoughts and understandings challenged in that way.

Over the past 16 years Greenbelt has been held at Cheltenham Race Course, a great venue because of the indoor facilities it offered. But last year it was announced Greenbelt was moving to a new site, Boughton House near Kettering and having been going for the past 15 years to Cheltenham it felt like a huge difficult

change, back to basics, back to what the old Greenbelt was like in the late 70's.

They always have a theme for Greenbelt and because of the move this year's theme was, Travelling Light. The idea of travelling light conjures up all sorts of thoughts and ideas. Travelling light means we have left all but the essential things behind. It means we leave some things we hold on to so dearly, it means taking risks by leaving some of those things behind. Travelling light means that you can also move quicker, not carrying all the baggage we have accumulated and travelling light also means that we can go further and be more adventurous. I was also reminded in the communion service on Sunday that you can travel light by travelling alone, you can move much faster and much further and much more efficiently travelling alone. But in doing so, you might miss the depth of what the journey itself is likely to offer. In travelling fast and alone you miss the joy of companionship, you miss to appreciate the journey itself, the flowers in the field, the birds on the trees, the sheer beauty of the journey and the experience of travelling together in companionship.

Moving from one place to another isn't easy. Giving up all that is familiar and being transformed into God's likeness isn't easy. It

does involve sacrifice, it involves leaving things behind and travelling on a difficult journey, but to appreciate the journey and to ease the burden we mustn't travel alone. The whole point of a church community is that we travel together, to find the right direction, to help one another on the way and to appreciate each other, and to value the journey as we travel together. In travelling together we can learn from each other and find strength in being together, strength we need to make that transformation Jesus is talking about. There's one essential lesson I learned a long time ago and that is 'you can't be a Christian and tackle the journey on your own'. You can't come to church just now and again, and expect to be taught, fed enough to sustain you on the journey. Taking up your cross means making sacrifices, sacrifices of self, for the sake of yourself and for the sake of others.

The Good News of today's gospel is that Jesus calls us to live transformed lives, even though that may not be easy. The Good News of today's gospel is that God gives us the resources to take up our cross and for us to be challenged and changed. But in order for us to meet that transformation we need to recognise that we cannot do it alone. In taking up our cross Jesus calls us to travel together, to learn for one another, to pray for one another and to be companions together on the journey.