

## August 30: sermon for the churches



Gospel reading: Matthew 16:21-end (NRSV)

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

*Bishop Paul writes:*

Friends, thank you for the opportunity to connect with you and to serve the churches in this holiday month. I hope that your own clergy and other ministers are having the rest and refreshment they need, so that as my friend Stephen Hance says, they may return to offer their own best selves to their ministry as the Autumn begins to unfold. I want to thank them for their creative and unflagging ministry, and to thank you and all your community for being there for God and for others in this stressful and painful pandemic season.

Today's Gospel reading also speaks of stress and pain, as Jesus shares with his friends the cost of his faithfulness to God's call. The road to resurrection runs to the cross, and as Jesus explains this his words prove too much for Simon Peter.

Let's remember the context of this passage. Literally a couple of verses before, Jesus has said this to Simon: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Wonderful words of affirmation and upbuilding - words which have perhaps gone to Peter's head.

There are a few examples in scripture of the blessings of God going to people's heads. Another is from the Old Testament, where in 1 Kings 18 the prophet Elijah defeats the many prophets of Baal, as the true God brings fire on the sacrifice and the false prophets are confounded and indeed killed. And then, at the height of Elijah's triumph, he is overcome by fear, and he flees and suffers depression, as he says to God, "Now O Lord take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors".

Affirmation and power from God are given us for a purpose, and not simply for their own sakes. Otherwise we wander from the path.

So Peter, having received the blessing of affirmation, takes it upon himself to try to turn Jesus away from the road of the cross. And we read, “[Jesus] turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

Peter is rebuked because he wants Jesus to avoid the cross. We may wonder why he should face such a fierce rebuke when all he’s doing is seeking to protect his friend from suffering and pain.

The answer is given in the next verse, where the writer tells us: “24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’”

In other words, Peter’s desire that Jesus should avoid suffering goes against the grain, not only of Jesus’ own destiny, but also of the path that faces us all. It’s not that God wants us all to suffer for the sake of pain; it is that following our Lord sets us on a path of self-giving which needs to be embraced and not resisted, since life is to be found there and nowhere else.

In this Diocese of Liverpool we say that we’re asking God for a bigger church to make a bigger difference, and we say ‘more people knowing Jesus, more justice in the world’. In other words we set ourselves on the path of dependence on God, commitment to sharing faith, and commitment to seeing justice done. Each of these three things leads us to follow Jesus on a path that leads away from our own comfort and our own self-aggrandisement, and towards following Jesus, not only on the hills but into the valley.

In these days of the pandemic we know what following Jesus into the valley looks like. We’re surrounded by people, key workers and others, who put their own lives at risk to be there for others. We seek to extend care, and safety and assurance, to our neighbours, and we recognise that care and safety and assurance when we see it. We give thanks and praise to God as we resist the temptation to despair and to give in to selfishness and anger. Living lives of worship and service, we seek always to put others first and to care for them and their wellbeing. Loving God as we do, we seek to share that love, and that good news, with those we meet. Seeing people hungry, whether for God or for bread, we seek to feed them.

All this doesn’t add up to a masochistic lifestyle of suffering and gloom. It can bring us to a place of extraordinary fruitfulness, lightness and joy. But we reach that place by the way of putting God and others first, the way which the Bible describes as the way of the cross.

My prayer for you is that you reach that place of fruitfulness, lightness and joy, by following - by following Jesus and by standing in company with all those in your community who

follow him too. Then you will be able to be there for the frightened, and the bereaved, and the lost and the hungry, and to give yourself in service for the sake of love.

I thank you again for all that you and your community have already done to walk this road of love. And I pray for you that you will continue down that road, just as I ask your prayers for me and all my colleagues in the Diocese, that God will give us strength to walk that road too.

May God bless you and protect you as you serve and love. And may the affirmation and strength of God, which is so freely given, lead yo to be there for others first, on this Sunday and into the coming Autumn, and forever. Amen.

+Paul Liverpool. August 2020