

## O, Peter

Sometimes we, as human beings in the twenty-first century, forget that those hapless first followers of Jesus had no knowledge of who he was. They knew he was an important guy. After all, they answered his call to follow him. Yet they likely had no idea what was going to happen, when they first answered that call.

The Gospel reading for today makes much more sense if we back up a few verses. Jesus has been a busy lad, teaching the disciples and the crowds that gather through parables. The passage right before today's passage is where the apostles are heading back to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had just restored a blind man's vision in Bethsaida. As they are walking along Jesus asks "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8.27, NRSV) And the answers he's given are John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets.

Jesus ponders these answers, then asks "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8.29, NRSV). Now, it doesn't say so in the scripture, but I imagine that the apostles are suddenly quiet. Except for Peter. Good old Peter. He's fearless. Honestly, I admire his gumption. He doesn't worry whether or not he gets the answer wrong. He doesn't fret about what others think. Which is likely a good thing, because he gets it wrong about as often as he gets it right.

Peter is the first to answer Jesus' question. He says, "You are the Messiah". (Mark 8.29, NRSV) And while Jesus doesn't reply directly to Peter's answer, he does tell them not to tell anyone. "And he sternly told them not to tell anyone about him". (Mark 8.30, NRSV) Which brings us to today's Gospel.

Jesus takes his apostles aside and tells them about his upcoming death and resurrection. How, we live 2020+ years from this and have difficulty understanding it. How on earth do you think the tax collectors, fishermen and assorted motley crew of followers wrapped their head around what he was saying?

They didn't.

O, Peter.

He was the first to recognize Jesus as Messiah, Son of the living God. And when he heard that Jesus would need to die, he panicked and took Jesus aside rebuking him. "Uh, Jesus, ya, no, you can't let yourself be killed. We just found out WHO you are and you're going to sacrifice yourself?"

Now, the truth is, we don't know what exactly Peter said to Jesus, but we do know that Peter was rebuking Jesus. He was expressing sharp disapproval or criticism of (someone) because of their behavior or actions. Because, once again Peter didn't understand. Peter was the first to recognize the significance of this pretty awesome Rabbi from Nazareth that they had been following. And Jesus' reply to Peter's declaration was to stay silent about it. Not to tell anyone about what he (Peter) had puzzled together.

THEN Jesus gathers his followers around him and "he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly." (Mark 8.31-32, NRSV) This is quite a contrast to what they had JUST been learning.

Peter, in a matter of minutes goes from prize pupil, Well Done, good and faithful servant; to "get behind me Satan." (Mark 8.33, NRSV) O, Peter. You see, Peter, and the disciples, don't understand. Jesus is telling them what has to happen and they can't put it together. I have studied this passage for years and I can tell you it's one of the most challenging messages we read in Scripture.

In a matter of sentences, Jesus goes from recognition as the Messiah, which was a very big deal, shrouded in secrecy; to telling Peter that he's akin to Satan as he's "setting [his] mind not on divine things but on human things." (Mark 8.33, NRSV) O, Peter. You are trying to protect the Messiah, yet in doing so, you are preventing him from fulfilling his destiny.

Jesus tells his followers that he has to die and in three days will rise again. This sounds like a riddle, and yet we know, two thousand years later, that this had to happen. And we STILL don't fully understand what it means. I know I don't.

Jesus then starts talking in riddles "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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8.34-35, NRSV) This doesn't make any sense at all! But that's because they don't understand. Not Peter, and not the rest of the apostles either. It seems as though Jesus is speaking at cross purposes here.

Peter misunderstands what the true role of Messiah is. For Peter, he wants to protect the Messiah so that he may have eternal life. Peter wants to protect and thereby prevent Jesus from death.

What Peter doesn't understand is that Jesus MUST die in order to prove that he is the Messiah. Which is why Peter gets rebuked. O, Peter.

Peter is trying to protect Jesus from an all-out war, as that is how the community in first century Palestine understood the Messiah. From the blog "Salt", "In first-century Palestine, a prevailing view was that the Messiah would come and lead a military triumph, routing the Roman occupiers and restoring the Davidic monarchy, and Peter may well have been thinking along similar lines. At any rate, he has no stomach for the notion that the Messiah would be disgraced by suffering and death." (www.saltproject.org, Lent 2) Peter's interpretation and understanding is literal. He cannot wrap his head around an abstract notion, "The Messiah" being realised in Jesus and as such, he wants to protect Jesus.

What Peter does not understand is that Jesus understand of Messiah "In the overall flow of the narrative, the implication here is that for Jesus, Peter's view of messiahship amounts to a form of self-centered grasping, whereas Jesus has come for the 180-degree-opposite reason: to live for God and neighbor in love; to give, not grasp." (www.saltproject.org, Lent 2)

Jesus then says something that seems counter-intuitive to everything that the disciples believe. Jesus tells his disciples, and the crowd that they need to "take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8.35, NRSV) Not, take up this cross I give you, or pick a cross from the pile in the corner, but take up THEIR cross. The cross they know they have, like the cross we know we have.

If we, as twenty-first century followers of Jesus, want to honour him as Messiah, we must do as he told his first century followers.

We must set aside our egos in thinking that we can ever know the "mind of Jesus". We must die to the assumption that Jesus died for our sins so that we are now "off the hook" as it were. That we can understand that as followers of Jesus we have to set aside our life and live through love. God's love for the world, Jesus love for us, our love for each other.

The summary of the law, you shall love God and then love your neighbour as yourself. If we live, only for ourselves, we will never know the full understanding of God's love for us.

This passage is as challenging now as it was two thousand years ago. We are told that in order to live we have to die. We must set our mind on divine things, not on human things. But we ARE human...how are we supposed to understand the Divine?

By following in Jesus' example. If we take up the cross, not to rescue Jesus from it, but to walk with him through the suffering, then we will receive health, liberation and new life. Our suffering is not different from that of Jesus. It is the same. He is in us, and we are in him. Just as God is in us and we are in God.

I know this feels like torturous mental gymnastics, but trust me, if we are willing to set aside our egos, like Peter, and we are willing to pick up our cross, like Jesus, we will come to know new life. Not from fear or from martyrdom, but from beautiful, unequivocal love.

Jesus has his burdens. We cannot take Jesus' burdens from him, but we can join in his suffering. Jesus can and will take our suffering away. All we need do is pick up our cross and follow him. That road leads, not to death, but to life everlasting. It is paved with the tears of God, with the blood of Jesus and with the love of each of us, to God, to our neighbour and to and for ourselves.

Amen.

Mark 8.31-38

Sermon for Lent 2 - 28 February 2021

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