

14th Sunday after Pentecost Matthew 16:21-28. The rugged cross

This week's gospel's follows directly on from last week and for the last few weeks we have been looking at how Jesus has been teaching the disciples. When Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah in the passage we heard last week, Jesus calls him blessed because only God can reveal God.

The great triumphant hope of Israel has come, and yet his last words to the disciples were not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah.

Today we get to understand why they weren't to tell anyone, because they did not yet understand what this triumphant Messiah would look like.

So Jesus tells them He must now head for Jerusalem and will he undergo great suffering and be killed, and on the third day be raised. He could not be clearer. This is a different sort of triumph that Peter doesn't yet begin to understand.

Peter, filled with the zeal of the new believer, argues with Jesus, "no way! This is not going to happen!"

I think we can fully understand the human emotions involved here. Peter had spent many months with Jesus, watching him heal the sick and cleanse the lepers and cure the blind and raise the dead and challenge the religious authorities.

Peter had watched the sheer strength of his ministry and the authority of his word. And now he was being confronted with a future filled with weakness and passivity and vulnerability.

Peter didn't want that. He didn't want a broken Messiah. He wanted a strong God. Like others in Israel, he was expecting a mighty leader from the line of David to overthrow the Romans and restore Israel politically.

Jesus argues right back, 'Satan has blinded you to the truth, and you are actually a stumbling block to me, because you are acting according to the world. This is why I told you not to tell anybody, because you would have made Messiah into something smaller than God – earthbound and nationalistic' (my paraphrase).

He is teaching them that the Messiah needs to be the suffering servant. The suffering servant prophesied by Jeremiah and Isaiah. The Servant-King Messiah Jesus needs to take on the suffering and pain of the world in order to *bear it for us*. Isaiah prophesied that it is this taking on of the wounds and pain of the world (all caused by sin) that our wounds and pain are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

Jesus enters into the pain, sin, and horror of our world to at first share in it, then on the cross, to conquer it. He needed to share in it so we could come to him when we are suffering.

Jesus now bluntly tells them that following him will mean suffering, hardship and self-denial. It will mean laying down their lives to follow him in taking on the forces of unbelief with the very faith of Christ himself.

With hindsight, it is easy to see Peter's error. But Peter is very often us! The truth, I think, is we are all a bit uncomfortable about a suffering Messiah. We all want a strong God too. When we are hurt in life, when we suffer loss, when we have to put up with thoughtless words from others, when we are sick or dying, we want a strong God. We want a God who will heal us, or justify and vindicate us, or turn our darkness into light. We want a strong God.

But the problem is that, like Peter, we see strength from a very human perspective, not from a divine perspective. We understand strength to be the same thing as might, to be the same thing as vindication in the eyes of others. We understand strength to be victory. But that is a frail, human perspective. In the eyes of God, strength looks very different.

For God, strength is measured in vulnerability, in sacrifice, and by our willingness to endure all things in the name of God. That was the example Jesus was about to show for his disciples, and that is how he wants us to live our lives too.

This is part of the great pivot point in the gospels, and I think Peter may have felt let down at this point.

Until this point there was a certain glamour in following Jesus: the crowds flocked to them, the miracles never stopped coming, the teaching was constantly amazing, and maybe Peter enjoyed bathing in the reflected glory of Jesus. But now, that all changes. The glamour is gone, and Peter is left with the stark reality of the pain of discipleship.

We truly can't have God on our terms, as Peter wanted Jesus. There is a painful truth in this passage, that if we want to follow in the way of Christ, then our individual lives and our corporate church life need to be fully suffused in Messiah Jesus – servant King and Lord.

Because God is loving, faithful, and good, we can lay down our lives for him, this is how we lose our life to Jesus, and this is what it means to 'take up your cross and follow me.'

Where do we find our identity, as individuals and as a church? If we find our identity in our preferences or our comfort zones, then we will lose our identity because that is the nature of an impermanent, shifting world. That's what Peter was discovering. But if we find our identity, our life, solely in Christ and in the gospel, we will save our identity because Christ and the gospel are eternal.

It is by doing this, identifying *precisely* as a Christ follower, that we open ourselves to the full measure of God's blessing for that. It is by doing this that truly wonderful and good things happen to us as a Jesus following parish. Precisely, because God is good.

Jesus was calling Peter into a place of self-reflection; to reflect deeply on whether he wanted Christ or whether he wanted his own idea of Christ. Does he want to be a disciple of a populist

itinerant healer and preacher? Or does he want to be a disciple of the broken and suffering Messiah?

We are called to constantly die to our egos and live to Christ and it hurts because the cross of Christ is rugged and splintered – it digs deep. Yet, “whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

We are blessed with knowing how the story ends. The broken suffering Messiah will ascend to the heavens, taking his broken suffering body into the presence of the Father. Broken and scarred for me and you, where he will be glorified for all eternity because of his wounds for us.

Let me pray ... (John the Baptist prayer – that we may become lesser and Christ greater).