

Based on Matthew 16: 21-28

The readings for this Sunday invite the church to be grateful and obedient to God.

In this Gospel reading from Matthew, we see one of Jesus' most profound reflections on the obedience that God ought to be able to expect from the people *claiming* to be faithful followers and children of their creator.

Jesus announces his own future suffering obediently and he invites the disciples to share in that same destiny of obedience to the point of death, promising that such willing obedience is actually the doorway to new life.

"Business as usual" isn't an option for people claiming to be faithful to God and I think that our experiences of COVID 19 and the related 'lockdown' have been a pretty stark reminder of that. People who are genuinely faithful to God are committed to a new and sometimes costly way of life in the world.

The requirement to move from freedom (given by God) to responding to the demands (made by God) reflects the theme of the Gospel that actually, death is the way to REAL life.

If we need further evidence about our inability to resist the demands of God - that's if we are claiming to be faithful - we only need to look at the fact that the burning bush in the Exodus (3) story, wasn't consumed. It demonstrated that God is full of stupendous energy that cannot be destroyed and cannot deteriorate, or decay. When faced with such a daunting task from such a creator, not even Moses could say 'no'. Moses' instincts for comfort and safety were brushed aside by the presence of the living God, whose call he couldn't ignore.

Our Gospel extract follows on from last Sunday and the two readings are difficult to treat in isolation as they really belong together. In verse 21, Jesus' anticipation of suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem follows Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God in verse 16 of the same chapter. The sayings about self-denial and carrying the cross become highly significant alongside Jesus' conversation with the disciples in verses 13 to 20.

But I think that, most of all, Peter's exchange with Jesus in verses 22 and 23 can't be taken in isolation from Peter's confession of Jesus and the commendation from Jesus in verses 16 to 19.

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In verse 16 we shouldn't have been surprised when Peter is the one to respond to Jesus. After all, he is the first disciple to be called and his name is first on the list of twelve when they are commissioned.

Only Peter walks on the sea to meet Jesus, albeit fearfully and in some ways Peter acts as a sort of spokesperson for the other disciples, although sometimes he is just speaking for himself. Peter has been singled out as a particular recipient of a heavenly gift.

But then something dramatic happens. Jesus starts to talk to the disciples about the immediate future, the journey to Jerusalem, the suffering, death and resurrection and then Peter becomes very aggressively resistant to the prospect. He wants to talk Jesus out of going to meet his fate and so, suddenly, Jesus and Peter are on opposing sides.

"You are a stumbling block to me" Jesus says. "You are setting your mind on human things not on divine things". The prophet who has received the special revelation from God becomes immediately bogged down in the human way of thinking. The one specially blessed by God is now called "Satan". The rock on which the church is to be built turns out to be a 'stumbling block' for Jesus.

So what causes this change in Peter? He doesn't actually do anything wrong. According to the verdict from Jesus, Peter just thinks the wrong thoughts. He can't accept that suffering and death are a part of Jesus' vocation. He can't believe that God will let it happen. How often, in the face of dreadful occurrences, have we heard someone say "How can there be a God, when something like this is allowed to happen?" Peter's human inclinations want to wipe away vulnerability and distasteful things and see Jesus only as a successful Messiah in human terms.

So, despite the special place that Peter holds in God's eyes and in the divine revelation of what Jesus is doing, he just can't or won't grasp the reality of Jesus' *necessary* suffering and death.

And Peter has had like-minded followers in every generation. Religious people who genuinely and faithfully give the *right* responses but who find the idea of a crucified Christ deeply offensive.

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Jesus' sayings about denying self and bearing the cross hit home in Peter's human mind set.

But what is true for the Messiah is also true for disciples. Human imagination assumes that there must be a way to gain life other than by losing it, a way to Easter other than via Good Friday and a way to being a Messiah other than through suffering and death. But verse 26 powerfully wipes away any presumptions about any alternatives to the Cross.

In the final two verses, the Son of Man about whom the disciples were asked in verse 13, turns out to be both the judge who calls all of God's people to account and the bringer-about of the beginning of the rule of God.

So, what disciples think and how their actions and thoughts coincide aren't trivial considerations at all. They are very much the concern of the returning Son of Man. The same Son of Man who resisted Peter's attempts at diversion and went on to fulfil his vocation in Jerusalem. Amen and thanks be to God.