

Sermon 25th February 2024,
08.30, BCP Holy Communion
and 10.30 Holy Communion
All Saints' Cottenham

Readings: Romans 4.13-25 and Mark 8.31-38

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Sermon

Our passage from Mark's gospel this morning is a passage all about expectations, contradictions and reality. Just as it was for the disciples two thousand years ago, it's about who we expect Jesus to be, who Jesus really is and how we apply that knowledge in our lives.

But first, do you remember who was the person you trusted most when you were very young? Was it a teacher, a vicar, a parent, a grandparent or some other adult? Did you trust them implicitly? Did you do everything they expected you to do because you expected they knew best?

But maybe, like some teenagers, did you gradually stop trusting them? Did you start to doubt them, challenge them, contradict them? Did they not now live up to **your** expectations? Did you have different expectations of them because now you knew better than them? Maybe you had started to explore big truths and knowledge about the world for yourself and become convinced **you** finally knew best? Were there times when you got very confused? I know I did, all the way through my teenage and young adult years. And to be fair, probably much longer than that, well into older age!

In today's Gospel story Mark tells us that Peter appears to act a bit like a teenager. Peter swings from deep understanding and trust to fear and doubt about the future. It's all very human and understandable and today's Gospel story is not only a factual account. It is meant to raise big questions for us about faith to which there are some hard answers. This is especially the case after what came just before.

So here's a reminder about what came just before. Marvellous things had been happening in the lives of Jesus and the disciples. If I were sharing the 'just before' story with the younger children in Junior Church I would most likely use the Big Bible Story Book. Here's Mark chapter 8, recounting what was 'just before'. It's perfect for getting right to the heart of the Christian faith.

Jesus was with his friends one day.

"Who do people say I am?" he asked.

"Some people think you are someone from long ago, one of God's messengers come to tell us about God" they said.

"What about you?" asked Jesus. "Who do you think I am?"

Peter thought about Jesus. He remembered Jesus making blind people see and people who could not move walk again. He had seen Jesus make sick people better and feed hundreds with a few pieces of bread and fish. Peter had seen Jesus do amazing things. He had heard Jesus say wonderful things about God.

Suddenly Peter knew exactly who Jesus was!

"Jesus, you are the Son of God!" Peter gasped.

And he was right!

"Good for you!" said Jesus.

So far, so good. Jesus certainly had said and done wonderful things. In a flash, Peter had understood the enormous truth about the identity of Jesus, about who Jesus really was. Good for Peter! Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and Peter expected that the world would be perfect from that time on, all problems solved.

But in today's reading from Mark's Gospel, things have got more difficult.

In today's Gospel story we're into what theologians describe as 'the messianic secret', a Messiah who contradicts what we expect, a Messiah who is going to suffer and die. Jesus makes it clear to his disciples and others that to truly follow him in God's way will be hard, extremely hard. It may involve losing what they value or even losing life itself.

"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".

This passage from Mark's Gospel is full of contradictions on all sides. Jesus tells his disciples and lots of others in the crowd around them that he himself must suffer, be killed then rise again after three days. Peter in turn contradicts Jesus, telling him:

"No, you're not going to die. You can't possibly do that. I've only just found out that you're the Messiah!"

Jesus then contradicts Peter, his faithful follower:

'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

We can well understand that Peter's reaction is to contradict Jesus. Peter probably thinks Jesus must stop talking this way, or he will definitely put people off. Surely he can stick to the nice friendly words and actions, making life comfortable for everyone?

But we know that Jesus came to do much more than that. Jesus reminds Peter about divine things, God's purpose for the world, rather than human concerns. Jesus

challenges Peter, making him face up to the harsh prospect of what is to come. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, will suffer and die in Jerusalem before very long.

Do we think that this story of Peter, contradictions and challenges, has anything to do with the period of Lent we are now in? In many ways during the 40+ days of Lent we too are asked to face up to our expectations being challenged. We must face up to some of the contradictions of life and faith. We are asked to stay faithful, not knowing exactly what might happen to us. There will be great times in our spiritual life and also hard times. We are asked to live in hope and trust in God to get us through to the glorious experience of Easter. The period of Lent has always been a good time to reflect on what all that means.

The American theologian Frederick Buechner wrote in 1988:

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, asking himself what it meant to be the Messiah. For us, Lent is 40 days in which to ask ourselves what it really means to be Christian.

It's not always easy. We can be tempted to take shortcuts, to miss times of prayer and reflection, to get confused about trusting Jesus and God. That's very human, very like the story of Peter who in many ways was rather a slow learner. He made big mistakes, such as later denying he even knew Jesus his friend, and much later getting muddled about his promise to baptise Gentiles. In the 1st century Peter started to learn what it would mean to take up his own cross and face suffering. Tradition tells us that Peter himself was eventually killed by crucifixion because he was promoting the new Christian faith in a hostile culture. But the Gospels tell us that Jesus always had faith in Peter, whose very name means the rock on which church could be built over time.

We may not ourselves face such an extreme consequence to being a Christian but we will all have times of difficulty. Some 1300 years later than Peter, the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich understood well the reality of faith. She was seriously ill in a time of plague and she expected to die. But fortunately she survived and went on to write:

"First there is the fall and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God!"

She did not mean only physical illness but also spiritual setbacks. That should give us all hope to carry on living. In Lent we are encouraged to re-evaluate our mistakes, our failures, disappointments, hurts in the reassurance that God's wondrous grace enables us to recover and go on.

In the 21st century, like Peter we keep going, not always saying or doing what God wants of us but going in the right direction. We don't always see things clearly. We are not always the light that we could be for other people. We don't always reflect the wondrous light that can be God's truth in our lives. That image of light reminded me of what the great Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said:

“We are only God’s lightbulbs, and our job is to remain screwed in!”

So maybe that’s an image to leave with you. If you want to start with the idea in the literal sense, just think of the new lightbulbs that our churchwardens have recently installed high up on the pillars. The new lightbulbs were carefully chosen to give the best light possible for everyone who comes here.

Size may be deceptive. I’m told that this very small bulb is the more powerful one. You can’t always judge by size.

All of us can be effective lightbulbs for God in our own way. For that to happen we have to be well screwed into the best source of energy possible. That energy source is the love of God and our job as Christians today is to keep well screwed into God’s love by following Jesus. We can be big or small, younger or older, extrovert or introvert, new to the church or a regular attender over many years. We can practise our faith by coming to services and also by reading and reflecting at home. We can join one of the bible study groups at All Saints’ or online. We can come to the prayer events here during Lent. We can use this year’s ‘Watch and Pray’ booklet or the ‘Watch and Pray’ phone app, or both! You could say that being well screwed in to God’s love helps us to avoid being screwed up in life!

Whatever age we are, children, perpetual teenagers or mature in years and faith, let’s carry on aiming to be effective lightbulbs for God. Then we can go out into our everyday lives and give light to others in ways that might exceed our expectations.

Amen.