

Third Sunday of Lent 2023

Psalm 95, Matthew 16:21-28

Lord be with us and guide us today and every day, that we may confidently take up our cross and follow you. Amen.



Today, we're walking some more with Jesus. We're walking over 100 miles to be precise. We start from the north of Israel, in Caesarea Philippi, where the land is green and fertile, all the way south to Jerusalem, where the landscapes change dramatically, the land is more arid, and you are surrounded sometimes by gnarled olive trees as far as the eye can see.



It is easy to imagine what the journey feels like. Quiet, I am sure, in the hottest hours of the day, when our band of pilgrims would fall into a silent walk between two villages or wells. Animated perhaps in the early hours of the morning, with the excitement of a new destination, new people to meet, and fresh conversations to be had.

Conversations. They must have been fascinating. First, there were those between the disciples themselves. Imagine for a moment Matthew and Simon Peter: Matthew, a tax collector, an occupation despised by Jews bled by the Roman occupiers, and Simon Peter, a Zealot, part of a political group actively opposed to the Roman government... that must have been interesting!

Then there were conversations with strangers, where the disciples would have learnt indirectly from Jesus as he taught the crowds.

And finally, direct conversations between Jesus and his friends. And I did not choose Caesarea Philippi by chance. That district was the scene of two extraordinary events: the transfiguration, and the great confession by Peter. It was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his friends 'who do you say that I am?' And Simon Peter answered: **'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'** Everybody must have been stunned when he said that. That was a pivotal declaration. Jesus never referred to himself as the Messiah until Simon called him that. What a radical, Spirit-led thing to say! It was so significant that Jesus then said: 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' Extraordinary indeed. In fact, this declaration is so important



that from then on Jesus resolutely sets his face to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). As if this was the sign he had been waiting for, the sign that his time had come.

And so the band of brothers and sisters walks south to Jerusalem. Looking at the map, we're tempted to say they walk down, but actually, they travel up, through Galilee upwards to Jerusalem. That's because Galilee is 700 feet below sea level, and Jerusalem is 3,000 feet above sea level.



But the journey is of course not just a physical ascent, it is a spiritual ascent to the Temple, then to the cross, and finally to the Father. The footsteps of Jesus set the pace of a profound interior journey guided by the Spirit. Travelling always involved loving God with all his mind, heart, soul, and energy, and loving humanity as himself. And our pilgrimage of Lent is the same. And it's not easy, because there will be losses, and sacrifices to be made.

These sacrifices, we model them on what Jesus says. During more conversations with his friends, Jesus starts preparing them for what comes next. He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.

That is too much for Peter. And it would be too much for us too. We've been walking with Jesus for years at this stage, we've witnessed miracles, he is the one, surely, he is the one who will free us from the Roman occupation, from the misery of oppression, from the poverty caused by the occupier bleeding the population dry with their taxes!

And isn't the Messiah supposed to be strong and victorious? A great freedom leader?

After getting it totally right, Peter gets it terribly wrong. He rebukes Jesus: 'Lord, never, this shall never happen to you!'

Jesus' response must have shocked Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan! You're thinking like a human, when we need to focus on the concerns of God...'

I feel for Peter. I would have said the exact same as what he said. I would have been devastated at the idea of losing my Master, my Rabbi, my Leader. I always say that I love Peter because he reminds us all of our own humanity, our own failure to see the things of God. And yet, he is the rock on which Jesus will lay the foundation of the Church. We are human and yet we are the Body of Christ.

Like Peter, we have trouble putting aside our pursuit of human things. We strive to be independent, self-made, and self-reliant. Do we really bow down before the Lord our Maker? Do we really feel like the people of his pasture, the flock under his care? Psalm 95 reminds us that as humans, our ancestors tested the Lord, we try the Lord, our hearts go astray. In our society, getting ahead and getting enough to live comfortably is the goal. Most of us live in a context that rewards these values. And when we look for a church, what do we look for? Do we seek a community that feeds *our* spiritual needs and the needs of *our* family? Or do we seek an old rugged cross?



Several years ago, I spent a week on the Isle of Iona. And the first thing I noticed was the stone crosses, some beautiful and very old. They reminded me of Brittany, my grandmother's country on my mother's side. In Brittany, you find what we call calvaries everywhere. They range from very simple to very elaborate, with scenes of the life of Christ, and always, at the top, the cross. Old, rugged, a constant reminder that the way of the cross is not the way of modern society. They seem to say: 'look at the characters, look at what they do, they're different, they point us in a different direction, something much taller, much bigger than us.'



The cross that Jesus asks us to pick up and carry points us to two different things: a way of life, and the concerns of God.

Through the cross, Peter, the disciples, and we, are called to become willing servants of Jesus to serve the well-being of others; to seek not greatness, but to become small; to fight against the rulers of this world who cause suffering and oppression; to follow Jesus when the world is loveless; and to be witnesses to the things of God. That's how we gain life.

And through the cross, we express the ultimate trust in God, overcoming human blindness to see Jesus as the Messiah, conqueror not of men, but of death itself; and following his humble and sacrificial way towards peace and eternal life.

I would like to finish with a prayer from the Easter Liturgy based on Zephaniah 3, Jerusalem praises God:

Almighty God,
who called your Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;
through him who was lifted up on the cross,
and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

