

## Trinity XV September 12 2021 - Peter's Confession

A year ago we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of my ordination as a priest. Thinking of this as I prepared today's sermon, I was reminded of a bizarre incident in the first year after my ordination. An elderly priest, who had been very friendly and supportive when I was ordained, died rather suddenly. This was particularly sad as he had only recently been made warden of some almshouses in Malvern, Worcestershire. It seemed as though there was no time between the service to welcome him as warden and his funeral.

Naturally, I joined other clergy in attending his requiem and burial. As we left the Chapel of the almshouses, the older priests among us started debating vociferously who had been ordained longest and an order of precedence was established based on the number of years that each had been ordained. Of course, I was at the back of the procession behind my 'seniors'. It struck me as grotesque that old men could be competing to get closest to the dead man. I don't think that today I would be jostling for 'closer to the coffin' privileges forty years on if the situation arose again!

Something similar follows the events described in today's gospel. A bit later in Mark's account, the disciples jostle for precedence – just like the elderly priests in my story. Jesus has just foretold his future suffering and death and that's all they can do.

It's a bizarre sequel to a high point with which today's gospel begins. Jesus had asked his disciples about popular opinion about him – how did people *label* him (who do *people* say the Son of Man is?). Jesus follows this by asking them whom *they* thought he was. He moves from asking a general, generic answer to asking for a *personal* answer.

The disciples' first attempt at defining popular opinion about who Jesus is has them placing Jesus in the highest categories that they know. Jesus is like (or even actually) one of the key people from Jewish history, Elijah, or one of the prophets; or he is like the famous, recently executed, John the Baptist.

Then they move to the personal answer. Peter makes his declaration of personal faith: 'You are the Messiah'. In Matthew's Gospel he goes further and adds 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

In Mark's Gospel, the narrative immediately proceeds to Peter's denial. From the high point of Peter's recognition of Jesus as Messiah Peter's insight plummets to denial.

Jesus teaches that he will suffer and be put to death but Peter cannot accept this definition of Messiah. This prompts Jesus to rebuke him with the famous words 'get behind me, Satan'. Jesus will not take the easy way out that Peter favours.

In Matthew's Gospel, there is an extra detail. Peter is given a particular commission, of great historical importance: Jesus answered him, 'I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . . .' ["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, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."] This is used in RC teaching as the basis for papal authority, as the popes are seen as the successors of Peter, possessing the same authority to 'bind and loose'.

Matthew's version differs from Mark's in that there is a double recognition: as in Mark's gospel, Peter recognises Jesus' identity. But Jesus also recognises Peter's recognition of Jesus as messiah as a gift from God. As Jesus says, 'For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.' Peter has received the *gift* of recognising Jesus. *It's not that Peter has seen clever cored an exam success.; Peter has received a gift of insight.*

In both Mark's and Matthew's account of Peter's recognition – and the confused response of the disciples – the main issue is the nature of the Messiah. Foretelling his death, Jesus stresses the humility of the Messiah and his suffering fate, something that Peter and the disciples don't yet understand or accept.

To clarify this, a little later Jesus teaches 'Whoever wants to be first must be last, and servant of all..' And he illustrates this – a point of precedence (back to the funeral story?), by taking a child and placing the child in the midst of the disciples. He tells them that unless they can welcome such a child in his name, they can have no status with him.

Doing this, Jesus is acting a radical way. In antiquity, children and childhood were viewed entirely differently from today, essentially because infant mortality and childhood mortality was so high.

In the ancient world, the child was virtually without status. Until the child became an adult, its status was equal to a slave. Only once it became an adult could a child become a free person with rights to inherit the family property.

This means that Jesus was telling the disciples that the only way to behave was to embrace the person with the lowest status. In a sense, this exchange between the disciples and Jesus underlines what *he* means by Messiah. When Peter had identified Jesus as Messiah, he had accorded him very high status, but Jesus redefines being Messiah as something that entails humility and suffering.

The same happens for everyone who follows in Peter's footsteps. You won't come to recognise Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God' by your own efforts, any more than Peter did. Peter's recognition of Jesus was a gift from God – one which he was tempted to reject. You can't 'study your way' into faith. Faith comes from outside as a gift (although a gift that we can ask for).

And Jesus is problematic to anyone who looks closely at his life and teaching: it is natural for us to want a simplistic, superhero (just as the disciples sought to exploit Jesus' status and establish precedence). Instead, we find a suffering saviour. This puzzled and deeply troubled Jesus' first followers and often puzzles us. *We would love a superhero Jesus!*

But encounters with Jesus are gentler and not coercive. Just as none of us is known in the same way by anyone else, so our relationship to Jesus is personal and unique. We turn to him as individuals and have an individual relationship with him. We can seek this relationship and pray for it but it will happen – as it did for Peter – at the moment that God chooses.

Each of us may have a memory of 'when' we knew who Jesus was for us. It may have been at baptism or confirmation, when we joined a church congregation, or at some other point of life know only to us and God. It can be gradual or sudden.

It may also be that you see yourself as someone like the travellers on the road to Emmaus who were fascinated by Jesus and what he had to say but they had to wait to receive the full gift of knowing him – they only knew him when he broke bread. If that is so, the simplest and best approach in seeking him is *to ask for the gift of knowing Jesus*. And, even if you believe that you have already received the gift of knowing him, you should persevere in praying to know him better and grow closer to him.

The pattern for this is humility: 'Love one another as I have loved you'.