

Year A Proper 22. 30th August 2026

Jeremiah 15: 15-21. Romans 12: 9-21. Matthew 16: 21-28

Poor Peter!

Our Gospel reading today is more challenging than normal. Firstly, Peter is rebuked for not wanting Jesus to go to Jerusalem and an almost certain death at the hands of the authorities there. And secondly, Jesus says that whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will find it!

In our reading last week Jesus praised Peter for confessing him as the Messiah. Not just praised Peter but blessed him and said that the faith of the followers of the way of Jesus would be built on him, a rock, a solid foundation.

We can't blame Peter for his reaction, when Jesus started explaining to his disciples that the way of love was so threatening to those who only understood power gained and maintained by physical violence and fear. The almost inevitable consequence of challenging the centre of power with the message of love, compassion, and healing, that gave a clear picture of how God's kingdom should be on earth, that the messenger would suffer in the only way the oppressors knew. Jesus' message was a real threat, to the Romans, not because it came it was an armed rebellion, but precisely because it wasn't. The Romans knew how to meet force with force, violence with violence, but a single unarmed rabbi with a motley collection of a dozen or so followers?

Peter had only shortly before proclaimed correctly that Jesus was the Messiah. To Peter, and I feel sure, everyone else, they thought the last few years was a prelude to all they had been hoping for... an overthrow of the Roman oppressors and occupiers of their land. They had all heard Jesus proclaim the arrival of a new kingdom of God, and their expectation was built on scripture and on the natural longing to be free of the oppressors.

But... Jesus disabused them of this longed-for armed rebellion, the violent overthrow of the oppressors. This would have been a shattering moment; the disciples would need to recalibrate their dreams and expectations, maybe

many of them unconsciously constructed, but in their minds nonetheless. To call Jesus's prediction of his death disorientating is far too mild an adjective. It would have felt like their view of the future had just had a massive seismic shock.

Peter just said what probably all of the disciples were thinking. Jesus could avoid his suffering and death by not going to Jerusalem. As Jesus pointedly said to Peter, he was thinking in human terms and based on human concerns about preserving one's own life, not having in mind the concerns of God. Peter's words were based on the human desire to avoid pain; very tempting and most alluring, but not the way of God. I think Jesus, with all his resolve had to deny that tempting path; a path that would have run counter to all of his teaching, his message of universal love, of costly action to relieve the suffering of so many. The message needed to be heard not just in the backwaters of Galilee, but in the centre of power, in Jerusalem.

This then leads into Jesus' opaque statement about those wanting to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for him will find it.

Is Jesus saying we must pursue suffering and death? That striving to lead a life following the ways of Jesus is not the best choice? That living such a life is not about living but dying?

What does it mean to lose our life? I don't think it means to die. So what does it mean to deny myself, in our 21st century world? How are we to save our lives by losing them for Jesus' sake?

Our world has many injustices, many wrongs, such massive economic inequality, where should we start and what should we do? I think Jesus' call was for us to be far less self-centred, to stop doing everything we can to inure ourselves against any risks. That is saving our life, bubble-wrapping it, being separated from so much of our world, and therefore 'losing' our lives. Instead, we are to be willing to step out into the world and see where we can work to help bring a sense of God's kingdom to all who are suffering, to work for peace, to identify with and support those who suffer, and move out of our comfort zone.

Jesus' message is that in God's kingdom, we cannot sit back and be comfortable whilst others are suffering. I believe Jesus is really challenging us. I interpret his message in this gospel reading to mean that only when the least and the lost are as equally comfortable as we are, will our work be done: when we recognise Christ in everyone who suffers and seek to alleviate all that causes them pain. There is a cost, a sacrifice, to be met, and in doing that work, we will find our lives, our meaning and our purpose. We shall 'find our lives' in such kingdom work.

Jesus knew he was going to die, had accepted that inevitability, and until his last breathe was teaching and modelling the values of the kingdom of God.

We are all mortal, we are all going to die. Given that inevitability, the question posed for us today from Matthew's gospel is, 'how will I choose to spend my time and my resources?'

Given the state of the world, we can withdraw, ignore the news, not let any of the injustices and cruelty in this world affect us – wear a sort of armour of denial or even apathy for all that is wrong in the world.

However, Jesus is asking us to experience and acknowledge the suffering in the world, and partner with Him, in working to bring glimpses of God's kingdom to all who are suffering. I think that sort of living is akin to what Jesus called living abundantly.

When I reflect on this reading and survey our world in respect to this reading, I see that we all, intentionally or not, place ourselves on a continuum, and our position is likely to change on that continuum at different times in our lives. At one extreme end is the person who is totally oblivious to the state of the world and actively seeks to distance themselves from any hint of suffering by others, is focussed on their own life and their own comfort, to the exclusion of all else. At the other extreme we have the example of Jesus Christ, fully aware of himself, but also fully aware of all that travails people in the world.

Jesus emptied himself for God's kingdom to be shown to all who would watch or listen. And for Jesus, his example included being willing to continue to love despite the injustice of the accusations against him, and being able to forgive those who condemned him to death.

As we survey history we can all think of examples of people who chose the ways of peace, and yet were imprisoned, beaten, disabled, assassinated or executed.

Although there are times I wish to ignore the news of atrocious things happening in the world, I know that can only be a temporary retreat to enable me to build up my resilience to go back into the world and to read or watch what is happening. But what do I choose to do, having seen such awful things? I know one of my friends chose to blockade the Leonardo factory in Edinburgh that supplies parts for F-35 planes that Israel uses in bombing Gaza, killing so many men, women and children, and also bombing southern Lebanon, and western Syria. That is not something I feel able to do mainly because I do not want to get arrested! I think I take the easier way out by donating to Medical Aid for Palestinians.

I wonder where you have been positioned on the continuum over the years, and where you think you may be right now? Is that intentional, or 'just how it is'? Where do you feel comfortable being on the continuum, and what action can you take to maintain or change your place on it?

Being a Christian isn't all plain sailing. Jesus' teachings warn us of the cost of true discipleship. 'Those who save their lives will lose them. Those who lose their lives will save them'. Jesus, the perfect example to us all, vindicated this when he chose to enter Jerusalem, to continue his proclamation of God's kingdom, and was executed, and rose from the grave.

How do we respond today, to Christ's message?