

Trinity 12. On being a follower of Christ.

Last week, we saw how Peter got it so right! He recognised Jesus as the Messiah. However this week, only a paragraph on in Matthew's gospel, he gets it catastrophically wrong again. When Jesus tells them how he is to suffer, Peter takes him aside and says that they cannot let that happen. Jesus's response is positively savage. He calls Peter Satan, a stumbling block. A shocking reaction! I cannot help feeling sorry for Peter because he was concerned about the welfare of Jesus, his beloved friend. Surely the right reaction is protect him? Or is it?

And it must have been a very tempting thought for Jesus to take the easy way out, to avoid the suffering that was to come. It's one of those points in the gospel when his humanity shows through, when the natural animal instinct of self-preservation kicks in and he has to resist it robustly, so Peter gets an earful for showing concern about Jesus wellbeing. I wonder whether perhaps Jesus is actually angry with himself for even considering the temptation? His strong condemnation of Peter is perhaps just a reaction against that. Peter's kind of Messiah is not a pattern that Jesus can follow if he is to fulfil the destiny his Father has given him. To do that would not have changed the world; it would have perpetuated worldly violence and death, not conquered it. Jesus is struggling to show his disciples that they must follow his way to obtain the promise of real life, eternal life. That way is not the easy way as Jesus is at pains to tell his disciples. There will be suffering and pain but the ultimate reward is so much greater.

St Paul tells the Romans in today's epistle that they must love genuinely. They must bless their persecutors, be patient in their suffering. Not avoid it. The old ways of hatred and violence must be rejected; the only thing to be hated is evil. He ends the passage, *'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with Good.'* The way of Christ is the way of love, not the way of the world.

Jesus's message to the disciples is that they must deny their worldly instincts for self-preservation and do what is right. To follow Jesus is not the easy path; indeed, his path here on earth was not easy. It is when he comes up against temptation to take the easy way as in the temptation in the wilderness, as in this instant and as in the Garden of Gethsemane on the evening of his arrest that we see Jesus's human side shine through, but the divine side always wins. That is his example to us, that to follow his way we have to have the same resolve; to do what is right in God's eyes, not the world's. We sometimes need to give up what seems to be good in order to follow Christ. He never promised an easy path. Through history martyrs have given up their bodily lives for Christ, but that is asked of only the few. We may need to give up what seems comfortable and familiar for something less attractive in order to carry out God's will.

But whatever path we find we have to take, we need to remember that it leads to something far greater than we can imagine. The promise of eternal life. As Jesus says, *'Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'*

Amen