

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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SHEPHERD AND GUARDIAN

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Isaiah 53:1-6
1 Peter 2:18-25
Luke 14:25-33

When you were growing up, were there certain children which, one way or another, your parents discouraged you from playing with? They may have forbidden you to have anything to do with so-and-so, or they may simply have been lukewarm about certain children's company, but were there those whom you grew up just knowing that your parents didn't want as your closest friends? Or maybe you were that child, who knew that he or she was deemed undesirable as a friend for your peers? If you had asked the parents why they were not so keen on this child or that, the chances are that they would say that they were afraid that their own children might be led astray. There are those children who seem likely to lead others, and maybe in ways that parents would not approve.

Turns out, Jesus was one of these. He went around saying "Follow me" to people, and then when they did, he expected them to stick close even when he was hounded by the authorities and put to death for what he was saying. And even after all that, he still expected people to follow him. He said as much to Peter, that day after the resurrection when they were walking by the lake-side. He told him to care for his flock, and then he told him that when he was young, he would dress himself and go about where he wanted, but when he was old, he would be dressed by another and taken where he did not want to go – and Peter's friend John tells us that this was to indicate the kind of death that Peter would die. Jesus had just been through death, he knew what following him would do to his friend and still he said it: "Follow me." Not what you might want for your child.

And Peter's family must have already wondered about what he was doing, going off, leaving his fishing business and tagging along with the wandering Rabbi. When three years before Jesus had healed his mother-in-law, everyone was very grateful, but they might have been a lot less grateful, if they could have foreseen that Peter would be away more than at home from then on. Not the sort of friend you might want for your child -leading him astray.

Though, of course, Peter was not a child. By the time he had that lake-side conversation with Jesus he knew what following Jesus might lead to – hadn't he spent the week after Easter hiding in an upper room?

Jesus told those who wanted to follow him to count the cost:

Reading: Luke 14:25-33

By the time that Peter wrote his letter to the small Christian communities he knew well what it was to count the cost of following Jesus. And he knew that his readers

were learning it as well. If they followed Jesus it would mean that they were different. If they followed Jesus it would give people an additional reason to look down on them, to blame them when things went wrong. The section of his letter that we read today is addressed particularly to slaves, because many of the Christians were from the bottom of society. Slaves had no redress, if they were unfairly blamed and punished for things which they had not done. Slaves had to take it. Peter tells them that when this happens, when they are suffering for doing what is right, they should remember that God sees and God knows and God approves them.

He tells them to remember Jesus, who also was accused unjustly and suffered only for doing what was right. And this word has spoken to Christians down the generation, when following Jesus has been a difficult and dangerous thing to do. It has spoken to reformers, it has spoken to non-conformists, it has spoken to those who have been made outcast by their families for converting to follow the faith of Jesus, rather than the religion of their ancestors. And still it speaks. When Christians in Iraq or Syria have recently been persecuted for being who they are and following who they follow, they have remembered Jesus. When Christians in Pakistan and some places in India have seen violence against their community, they have remembered Jesus. When Christians have been refugees with an uncertain future and nowhere to lay their heads, they have remembered Jesus.

We have little to complain about compared with our brothers and sisters elsewhere. We are not persecuted, though we may be ignored. We are not afraid for our lives, though we may be afraid of being laughed at. The cost that we might have to count is not as high as it is for some, as it was for Peter and those he wrote to, but there is still a cost to be counted. We still have to consider if we want to follow someone who might lead us away from what people might think a normal life, and into a life of self-giving, of self-forgetting, and of loving and giving again and again and again. Following Jesus is not just about following his teaching, although of course that is important. But following his teaching can lead us into the same kind of trouble that Jesus got into, or a variation of it. People who live without the light of God can still be resistant to and unnerved by those who walk in the light of Christ. Light shows up darkness, and dispels it, which means that it changes things, and there are many who have learned to live, to survive with the way that their life has unfolded who are afraid to change, even if it would be a change for the better. Follow Jesus, but count the cost.

And Peter gives us Jesus to think about. He talks about him in terms that are obviously drawn from Isaiah's words about the suffering servant – in fact Peter seems to have the prophet Isaiah well to the front of his mind in writing this letter. *“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When abused he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”*

And then we are told why following Jesus is a cost well worth paying. Why we should follow him, even if he leads us into difficulty and away from what is the easiest path in life. *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live by righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”* What Jesus went through he did for us. What he suffered was to give us forgiveness. There is nothing better than forgiveness. There is nothing better than knowing that we are free from sin – from the need to sin, from the power of sin dragging us down, from the constant regret at what we have done or said and its consequences of others as well as for ourselves. Jesus went through his suffering to free us from that.

And Peter reassures us that following Jesus, no matter what, is still the right path to take. Before we knew him, before we followed him, we were like sheep that go astray. Like the lamb I saw recently which had escaped from the field on the bend at Cluny castle, of all places. We were in a danger that we knew nothing of, having to try to find our own way through the busy traffic, you might say the mine-field, of life. But now, if we follow him, we have returned to the shepherd and guardian of our souls. We have returned. There is a coming home in following Jesus that those who are on the outside, who are not walking his path, cannot know about. After all we were created "to glorify God and enjoy him forever," we were made to live in companionship in harmony, in partnership with God, and when we follow Jesus we have returned to that original path: we have come home.

Peter is writing his letter to put backbone into the believers – and if he knew that we would be reading it still all these centuries later he would be pleased, I am sure, and want to help us to find our spines as well. He knew the realities of following Jesus first hand, and he knew that Jesus leads us into what the world may call trouble, from persecution, to discomfort: he leads us on his own narrow path. But he also knows that it is worth it. He can say with confidence that it is worth it, because in following, we know God's forgiveness, in following we are restored to unity and companionship with God himself. There is a song that we have sometimes sung in Messy Church which says "*It's an adventure following Jesus, it's an adventure living for him....*" Peter knew that and he wanted us to know it as well. Adventures are not always easy, but in them we grow and develop, and life becomes fuller and richer. And following Jesus does that as well. So never mind if he leads you into what may seem like trouble, follow him whole-heartedly, and see where he may lead. Amen.

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