



## Revd Ro's Reflection on 13th Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 17

### Year A

**Romans 12.9-21**

**Matthew 16.21-28**

The gospel passage begins, 'From that time on...' We need to look back to what has just happened. We remember that Jesus was with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi and that Peter had just made that wonderful statement, 'You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.'

This is a turning point; Jesus has acknowledged that that is exactly who he is and because of this he has a path to tread. We have seen that Jesus is not popular with the powers that be. We have heard his disciples warning him that his comments put him on dangerous ground, but here Jesus is telling his disciples just how serious things will become.

<sup>21</sup> 'From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'

Not only that, but the course of events he describes is something that he must do, and is foreordained to carry through. Jesus spells it out quite clearly, he will be killed but, and it is a huge but, for the disciples and for every Christian, 'on the third day be raised.'

The resurrection is at the centre, without that Jesus would be another great man but nothing more. The resurrection means one thing only, Jesus is God. Jesus is the incarnate God walking with them, the face of God that humanity has seen, the second person of the Trinity.

Poor Peter. Here he stumbles again. Jesus had given him the promise that he would, from henceforth be the rock upon whom the church would be built. He would be the leader.

But Peter is human and he is big hearted. He loves Jesus and so when Jesus makes this shocking announcement Peter reacts as any normal human would. 'No way, this must never happen to you.' We think of Peter later promising Jesus he would never leave him, he would fight to the end only to fail when it came to it. With Peter often the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. We can all

empathise with that. Peter is reacting as any Jew would too, if Jesus is the Messiah then he will be the conqueror, the one who will lead the people to victory over their oppressors and bring in God's rule. It's not part of the plan that the all-conquering Messiah should be killed!

Peter reacts out of natural feelings, the insight we saw before has gone. Jesus sums it up when he says, 'you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Peter cannot see that if Jesus is the Messiah, then there are consequences. Jesus is the Son of God, the saviour of humanity and salvation will be won on Calvary and at the resurrection, not with arms. There is no other way for love to triumph over evil. If we think of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, where Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world, Jesus makes it quite clear that God's way is not the human way.

<sup>5</sup> 'The devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him." ' Luke 4.

Jesus has made it clear to the disciples what will happen to him in Jerusalem. But there is a consequence for his followers. It is they who will be carrying the torch or Christ light when he is no longer with them. It will probably mean persecution and death; they will be following in his footsteps.

<sup>24</sup> 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.' Matthew 16

To follow Jesus was not easy, for the disciples and so many of the early Christians it meant persecution, sometimes martyrdom. We are so very fortunate, we do not risk death for our beliefs but we know that in many countries to follow Jesus does mean just that. They have to take up a cross daily. However the challenge is still there for us, for any Christian. Jesus says to the young man who wants to have eternal life, give up everything and follow me. Jesus means what he says, to be a Christian does not mean its ok to create a cosy version of it. This challenge means we have to follow Jesus' teachings even when we would prefer to go our own way.

Jesus offers eternal life to all who follow him wholeheartedly. Nothing in the world, nothing we can gain or achieve can compare to that, even if it means paying the ultimate price of discipleship, as indeed so many did and are still doing.

<sup>25</sup> 'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'

Jesus then makes the famous statement that made many of the first Christians believe that Christ's second coming was imminent. In fact Jesus is referring back to what he said at the start of the passage,

<sup>21</sup> '...he must go to Jerusalem and endure great suffering at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.'

That is when 'the Son of Man will come in his kingdom.' That is Jesus' triumph, his glory. That is why Calvary is a throne.

Jesus will return to his Father, Jesus the creator of all will have accomplished his mission and will take his place with God and reign. He will come again and he will judge the earth at God's recreated

order. Our role is to play our part in establishing the new creation when all will be perfected according to God's plan and goodness will triumph over evil, love over hate.

Jesus has never left us because the Holy Spirit came to humanity. Alone we are like Peter is at times, weak and faltering, but we know that the Holy Spirit of God is within us to guide and strengthen us. This is the essence of prayer.

I have said that Jesus accepts no half measures, and that is what Paul is at pains to explain in the letter to the Romans. Paul is writing instructions for individual action and for the members of the church in community. What a wonderful pattern he gives for life and it is directly the teachings of Jesus.

In the passage last week he spoke of the gifts given to people to use within the church. Now he looks at what individuals need to do if they are to be Christ's followers. There are no half measures in what Paul says to them. This passage echoes the message Jesus gave in his teaching ministry. It begins with Jesus' central message. 'Love one another.' I am reminded of the phrase, 'See how these Christians love one another'.

A church leader in Carthage, Tertullian wrote in a defence of Christianity: "It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See how they love one another, they say, how they are ready even to die for one another.'

That takes us back to Jesus' words, 'take up your cross and follow me.'

Christian behaviour should stand out as different. Jesus' teaching did turn accepted values upside down. So often in society people are measured by success in jobs, in wealth. They outdo each other in their ambition to; 'get on' in life. Well Paul says you must outdo one another – how 'In showing honour.' Christians need to strive for excellence in behaviour, in kindness to each other. It is the person that you are that matters not your success in your job etc. All are equal in God's sight, status is nothing to God. Paul says quite clearly there is no such thing as Jew or Greek, (or anyone else). The church of Jesus Christ is to be built upon equality, respect and love.

Love must be central, that means caring about each other. Love must be genuine; there is no room for pretence or playing a part. Any action must be genuine in every way, artifice is not acceptable. When Paul says, 'be patient in suffering' he is not just referring to the suffering life inflicts on us all but in the face of the persecution that is likely to come their way.

He stresses the centrality of prayer in the life of the individual Christian and in the community of Christians, verse 12 'Persevere in prayer.' Our prayer life, our relationship with God is central to our Christian life.

Paul's next words, 'do not repay evil for evil,' are mirrored in Matthew's gospel chapter 5 in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says,

<sup>43</sup> 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy."<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; ...<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?<sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Matthew 5

Jesus' words in the Sermon are a guide for living in his way, God's way; Paul is reiterating this guide here. It is, however, difficult to put into practice. It is not easy to love those who persecute you. Jesus is not saying you must condone evil, we condemn it, stand up for the truth and for what is right. We must forgive though, that is central to Jesus' teaching. That is what Paul is saying too.

Really the whole passage is beautiful and it is a wonderful guide for us and a measuring stick for our behaviour. It sets out a way of life. Paul outlines the behaviour that should govern a community. 'Contribute to the needs of the saints,' everyone in the church matters. The key note is care for each other. Only this way can the church truly be successful, or indeed be said to be following Jesus' teaching. 'Live in harmony with one another,' 'take note for what is noble in the sight of all.' The idea of individualism, personal power and selfishness has no place here. The point is that people should think of others before themselves. Paul sets out a pattern for pastoral care. Forgiveness and kindness is central to Christian behaviour. The bit about 'burning coals' is easily misread. I think it means that it is love that will most surely overcome evil not hate; that only perpetuates it. A person is more likely to be sorry for what they have done if they are treated with love and care and obvious forgiveness.

It is useful, if tough, to go through these verses and ask ourselves just how much we are achieving these goals. We are human, not perfect; but like Peter, the fact that we try is the most important thing. Paul is writing for the early church, but we have to apply his words and Jesus' teaching to ourselves and our relationships. We are all children of God. Jesus requires us to show care for the world, for all people. When he tells the story of the Good Samaritan he is making exactly that point. We see constantly what happens in society when people let selfishness, power and ambition take over.

Paul's writing here is a pattern for decent living, a plea for kindness and mutual respect. These things are the rocks upon which the church of Jesus Christ should be founded.

To be a Christian is a huge responsibility because people will measure our actions by what we profess.

*'We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow trav'lers on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load'. R Gillard.*

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