



Romans 12.9-21
Matthew 16.21-28
30th August 2020

Walk This Way

ALL AGE TALK: **Walk This Way**

It's an old Vaudeville joke, it's used in lots of films and is quoted in the current work being read by the AFC Book Discussion Group.

The rather odd Bell Boy is commissioned to show the guests to their room instructing them to 'Walk this way'. So, off they go, puzzled but copying his strange gait as they ascend the staircase. It gets a laugh and can be used in countless contexts.

As a toddler, I'm told, I did much the same thing copying my grandmother's walk. She had a pin in her leg so couldn't bend it. So whenever I visited her at Rickmansworth both she, and the three year old me, would walk down Ricky High Street with a stiff leg – we must have looked quite a pair!

As Peter and his friends get to grips with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus they slowly (and sometimes it's very slowly) come to realise that they have to *Walk like Jesus*.

At first Peter isn't too sure what that means because, as we'll see in Sunday's reading, he's still a bit confused as to who Jesus really is. Part of him still wants him to be a powerful King, but Jesus will, from this point on, not only teach him, he'll also show him, that he came to be a selfless Servant.

That's why a cross is often the symbol of Christianity. Jesus gave his life, selflessly serving others and he even lost his life doing so.

On a church youth group holiday to Scotland in my teens we stayed in an old castle. A small room was set aside for private prayer. One morning I

crept in just to see what happened. I sat in a corner out of sight and a minute or so later the leader of our group, our Bible Class Teacher, came in. He didn't see me, but I watched him. I saw him read a few verses from the bible and then get on his knees to pray.

I remember nothing of what our Bible Class Teacher said during his talks that holiday, but I've never forgotten seeing this wonderful man sink to his knees as he committed a new day, and all us youngsters in his care, to God.

It made the deepest impression on me, for I thought then, even as I do now, that he was someone who Walked like Jesus.

SERMON: **A Couple of Misunderstandings**

Minister: Let the words of my mouth

All: And the meditations of all our hearts

Minister: Be acceptable in your sight

All: O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Today's gospel reading is full of misunderstandings.

The first is about who Jesus is.

He doesn't come pre-packaged but, of course, he did come with lots of expectations hanging around him.

One theme explored in his Temptations is that of living up to those expectations rather than following the will of his Heavenly Father. It's always attractive to play up to the crowd; it's easy celebrity but it's not the way of Jesus.

Perhaps, up to now, the person and message of Jesus has been ambiguously tantalizing in Matthew's gospel. So here in chapter 16 he spells out the future and says *from this time on Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and endure great suffering...to be put to death and to be raised again on the third day.*

No doubt this is Matthew reading the story backwards and trying to make sense of it. Yet, he is convinced that about this time in his ministry Jesus overtly revealed the way ahead, and Peter didn't like what he heard.

Heaven forbid he says! Peter isn't sitting on the fence here but actively and deliberately blocking Jesus' way. He's preventing him from being the Servant Leader he feels called to be. Peter is becoming a stumbling block and in the sternest language possible Jesus rebukes him with the stinging words: *Out of my sight Satan*. I guess you could have heard a pin drop afterwards.

I suspect Peter wasn't alone in the horror with which he received Jesus' revelation of suffering and a cross. Maybe this wasn't really what he signed up for. Perhaps for him, and probably for many, the mission of Jesus was surely about a new tomorrow, taking back control, living once more in their own country like people who belonged rather than refugees oppressed by an occupying power.

But no, Jesus said, *wait*. The freedom and dignity of which he spoke was a new way of living centred around loving service. Perhaps all Peter had in mind was the old way just with different people now in charge.

Peter and the others had surely travelled a long way in their thinking with Jesus but still that term *The Kingdom of God* created all sorts of expectations.

It's always been a term, then and now, open to misunderstanding, especially if we view Kingship in terms of might, authority and power.

But what does a servant king look like? At its best moments that is the paradigm at the centre of Jewish monarchy. The king who was like a shepherd, caring for the nation by making sure the weak were never left behind.

Jesus reveals to us a cross carrying God. A God who enters into our pain by sharing it. A God who, in Jesus, shows us a Way of Love and Service.

And that's the genius behind it all. Jesus never simply talked of this way,

he lived it. He showed us the way. He carried a cross and gave up his life in the service of others.

And here, in today's passage, he says to Peter *Walk like this*.

To carry a cross is to become deliberately vulnerable, to leave a door open to reconciliation even when its you who has been wronged. To go the extra mile, even at your own expense. To give your all, even if its those you love who will benefit from that sacrifice rather than yourself.

When we encounter such loving, our lives are truly blessed. It is the way of God and it is the way of The Cross.

Peter's misunderstanding of his Master didn't stick. He got it in the end and walked like Jesus.

I think the second, potential misunderstanding that comes out of today's gospel is about The Self.

Matthew has Jesus say *Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must renounce self...*

In Sigmund Freud's *Psychic Apparatus* the Id is the instinctive part of our nature. It's about all the desires we have that will eventually be controlled by our ego and then become part of the moralising compass of our super-ego.

But, we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves here as Matthew hadn't heard of Freud.

The problem is, I think, that read one way and we Christians can misunderstand these references to *self*. For years The Church has instilled guilt into people who already find it difficult to love and accept themselves.

So, how does this talk of *renouncing self* square up to other biblical insights such as *loving our neighbour as ourselves* or rejoicing in the idea that we are *made in the image of God*. One understanding seems to celebrate our

humanity whilst the other diminishes it.

I don't think for a minute that Jesus was trying to negate the inherent dignity found in every human being. This is the Jesus who so clearly did the opposite as he strove, at personal expense, to honour those who lived at the margins.

Isn't the essence of what Jesus is saying here that we should deny selfishness but embrace selflessness?

The first is a false self, in that it isn't what it means to be made in God's image. When we pit ourselves against each other, grab at power, lord it over another whilst aggressively pursuing a selfish goal; that isn't God's way, and this is the sort of self to renounce.

Before we become too smug it's worth saying Jesus found this way of thinking not just in palaces of power but also in houses of prayer. He found it in religious people who perversely used matters of faith to construct a hierarchy which envisaged a heaven with a top table.

Jesus says in today's gospel *renounce this self*.

And then, in the call to cross carrying, he challenges us to embrace a selflessness that not only celebrates us, but honours those for whom we care. And isn't it also two way? For there are times when someone else will draw alongside us in loving support, and we will need the grace to accept their help recognising that they have reached out to us a fellow human being, and that both we and they, are made in the image of God.

We need to deny the selfishness of power and embrace the selflessness of love.

During Lockdown we have watched – and I was slightly horrified as I did the maths the other day – six Box Sets on TV! Some were old favourites, others were new. One was the period drama of the Medici family set in the beautiful Italian city of Florence. By the third series Lorenzo Medici has become so powerful that he orchestrated that both his son, followed by his nephew, ended up as Pope. It took a lot of gold!

Power, personal power, is addictive. And it can become corrosive in church, family, business or society life.

People lose trust in leaders who seem to cling to power at the expense of the well being of their people. We've witnessed that in recent days in the reaction of the populous to the explosion in Lebanon.

I've also read some books over Lockdown, just two or three, not six! One is a novel called *Easter* by the provocative writer Michael Arditti. It's set in a Holy Week context in a fictional Hampstead Parish.

One of the most moving moments for me came as Arditti wrote of the Maundy Thursday service which included the washing of feet. The vicar, about my age, is having his own personal struggle hanging on to faith, and he is not sure, anymore, what Communion means to him personally or might mean to those he's going to give it to later in the service. Yet, at the moment of foot washing, when he pours water over the feet of his north London parishioners, he feels an unexpected calm and ease in his soul. This, at least, makes sense to him. Service makes sense to him.

I guess he's not alone. Sometimes, perhaps often times, the joy of our faith is found as we live out practically, what we might struggle to believe theoretically.

Jesus calls us to *walk this way* and maybe, in the end, that's the very best understanding of what it means to be Christian.

May it be so, in the name of our cross carrying God. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 10th August 2020