**12 September 2006; Trinity 15, Proper 19**

**Isaiah 50: 4-9a; James 3: 1-12;**

**Mark 8:27 - 38**

1. Wrong again

Within a short three or four verses, this weeks gospel reading contains some of Peter’s best and worst moments. In v 29, he explicitly acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah – an incredible declaration of faith, yet within just a few verses, we read of an incident when he has so failed to get the point of what his master is saying that Jesus refers to him as ‘Satan’. Following the epistle reading, which speaks of the damage that can be done through the spoken word, here we hear Peter using his voice both to give expression first to his deep understanding and then to his misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus’ ministry. As ever, I find this passage very comforting because like Peter my faith journey seems characterised by moments of realisation and faith followed by times when I completely miss the point. So what is it that Peter has failed to grasp this time?

1. What is it that Peter has failed to grasp?

Quite simply, Peter cannot at this point stomach the things Jesus is telling his disciples about his coming suffering and humiliation. Peter has grasped that in Jesus, God is revealed, but he clings to the idea that the story will end in success, not apparent failure. His idea of the good news that Jesus comes to bring will have to change quite radically before he can become the man to establish the Church on a sure foundation of faith. Like us, his faith develops in stages – one step forward and two back at times, but Jesus is patient and goes on explaining. We have many examples in the gospels of times when the disciples did not really understand all that Jesus was saying. Yes, they were impressed by his healing, the miracles, probably by the force of his personality. They may even have welcomed his challenges to the system – the way he ate with poor people and sinners. As they themselves were not rich, no doubt this brought hope and made sense to them: the authorities were hard on the ordinary people, Jesus was clearly challenging both the ruling powers and the religious authorities in ways they understood and appreciated. But his teaching – and eventually his actions themselves – were not easy. He did not speak of political or social success and victory, but of apparent failure, suffering and humiliation.

1. Our failure to grasp it too

I don’t know about you, but I too find this hard to grasp. Suffering is not glorious, it is often senseless, and seems such a waste. Jesus was a deeply alive, charismatic, young man – the sort of person people wanted to be with. He went about doing good, healing people and encouraging others – surely his death was a senseless waste? And this tends to be our judgment on all senseless suffering and death, especially when it involves people who are innocent, or young. Think of those who die in war or through acts of terrorism, often with a whole life apparently before them. And think of your own suffering, the areas of pain in your own life, whether they involve physical pain or other types of loss and disappointment. So often when tragedy strikes people ask ‘why has this happened to me?’ or perhaps ‘why has this happened to the person I love?’ Jesus tells Peter that he is setting his mind on human things, not divine things. And our human perspective is one in which good efforts and deeds should be rewarded with success and happiness, not suffering and more endurance. When this doesn’t happen, we feel somehow cheated, or short changed. Yet here lies the heart of the Christian gospel.

Jesus says ‘those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’ This is difficult indeed – little wonder that Peter did not grasp it fully at first. Neither do we, even with many centuries of Christian teaching as a foundation. Yet grasping this is the challenge of the Christian gospel, and also the reason why it is truly ‘good news’. Like Peter, I myself seem to get it one moment, and then again revert to setting my mind on the human rather than the divine. But perhaps I can just refer to a few pointers that help me to see what Jesus was trying to tell us through his words and his life and death.

1. The challenge of the Christian gospel

I wonder if you have ever known someone who has faced difficulty with great courage? Perhaps someone whose life has dealt them a serious blow thath has been lived through in a way that becomes a source of strength for others as well as themselves? Maybe someone who has remained single when they wanted more than anything to marry, or someone who has devoted the best years of their life to caring for another person? Often suffering is not chosen, but thrust upon us. Yet there is a choice to accept it and grow, or to resent it and become bitter. Those who accept such difficulties often grow through them in ways that they would not have dreamed of. Sometimes this growth has a fruit that is visible to others - at other times, it is not apparent, but it is still there.

A poet monk called Thomas Merton, said that ‘in order to become myself, I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be’. I find these words very challenging and to the point. We all have an idea of how we would like life to be. And those dreams can get in the way of our growth into the particular persons God wants us to be.

Jesus had to give up any idea of becoming a successful teacher and healer, and accept God’s will that he would suffer and die. His temptations in the wilderness were all about reputation, security and power – power to do good. These are the very temptations that we face too. Indeed, the more we catch a glimpse of Jesus’ message, the more we want to be effective in helping others too. But this itself can take us off track, and prevent us accepting what God wants us to be. Continually we think we know best. And I suspect that Jesus’ response to Peter was sharp because Peter’s human doubts were too close to the bone. Surely Jesus himself wrestled with this same tendency to want to avoid the route of suffering and apparent ignominy.

It is indeed beyond belief that the cruel death of a Jewish peasant would become the means of changing the world, yet history shows this to be true. Like Peter, and perhaps also like Jesus in his own moments of doubt, we cannot believe that our own pointless sufferings – however minor - add anything to life. In the dark hours when we feel our life has been wasted, or when the struggle seems too much, and certainly not glamorous in any way, we feel it is all pointless and that the earth belongs to the happy, the successful. But the message of Jesus is that the truth at the centre of life is the opposite – happiness and success will pass away, but the life that comes either from willing sacrifice or from loving acceptance and obedience in face of suffering we did not seek – these are the things that really last. And here indeed is ‘a word to sustain the weary’ (Is 50:4). Amen