

## Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi

Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison at All Saints' Nottingham, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020

The conversation between Jesus and St. Peter which we have just heard comes at a turning point in the gospels. Jesus and the disciples are at a place called Caesarea Philippi, in the north of Israel, in what is now the Golan Heights. Peter has just realised that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah - and is commended by Jesus for being the first to understand this. He has just been entrusted with the leadership of the Church - being given the keys of the Kingdom and being given the name by which he has since then been known, Peter, the rock, instead of Simon.

But suddenly there is a clash. Immediately after this, as we read in the passage which follows this morning's gospel, we read that Peter cannot bear to think that Jesus will have to go to his death in order to fulfil his task as Messiah. Perhaps he is still expecting that Jesus will be a Messiah who is like a king, an earthly ruler, one to restore the nation of Israel after many years of being ruled by foreigners - which was what most people looked for in the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus has to rebuke him for getting in his way - for being a stumbling block, for trying to tempt him away from his course, even as Satan might. But this then leads Jesus to explain that not only does he have to die, but that his followers also must take up their cross if they are to be true disciples.

At the heart of this lies that memorable but disturbing statement, 'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a person if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?' Those words run counter to so much of what many people in the world today regard as important. Are there things for which we have sold our soul, as in the legend of Faust, who sold his soul to the devil in return for divine knowledge? That's a matter between each one of us and God. Have we achieved our worldly goals at a price for ourselves or for those around us which is too great? It is for each one of us to face up to these things, as we examine ourselves and our consciences.

Life in practice, it's only fair to say, tends to be a succession of compromises between the things we do which we know are not quite right, or even just wrong, and what our conscience tells us is the better, more Christ-like way. If we are honest with ourselves, we must surely all know that we regularly fall short of the ideal. However, central to the Christian life should be a confidence that God will search out, pick up and restore even those who have fallen furthest. St. Peter, who not only tried to dissuade Jesus from treading the path of the cross, but even disowned him three times when he had been arrested, was forgiven, was granted a

new start and then commissioned by Jesus to care for his flock, the Church. Remember also how Jesus granted forgiveness to the woman who had been caught in adultery, and was about to be stoned - telling her not to sin again. And above all, Jesus' very act of dying on the cross for our sins, and rising to new life, confirms that God's compassionate forgiveness is always available to those who genuinely seek it.

But on what terms? Are there terms? A phrase that has become established within Christian theology in recent years is 'unconditional love' - the idea that God's love for us and the world has no strings, that he loves us for who we are, whatever we do, the implication being that if we do fall into sin, it's not really our fault, that God understands the reasons for our misbehaviour and it's all really all right. It's absolutely true, according to the New Testament, that God loves everyone - including those who sin against him. But we misread Scripture totally if we conclude that this means that our behaviour doesn't matter. As St. Paul says, should we therefore sin all the more, so that grace - ie God's forgiveness, freely given - may abound? John the Baptist placed great emphasis on repentance - a change of heart and mind, a change of life; Jesus took it for granted that the life of a disciple involved repentance and turning afresh to God. One of the things that was so distinct about his teaching, though, was that it was never too late to repent, and that nobody was beyond the reach of God's grace. Remember the penitent thief next to Jesus on the cross, whom Jesus told would be with him that day in paradise. The poor, the unclean, the prostitutes, the tax collectors - all of these had just as much right to seek and find the new life offered by God as the rich, the powerful and those who portrayed themselves as holy.

So what does true repentance involve? There are many passages in the gospels which tell us of the way of life which Jesus urges upon us, in particular the Sermon on the Mount. The blessedness of the simple life; striving for peace; being ready to suffer for the sake of the gospel; not being too attached to possessions; trusting in God and not being too prone to anxiety; not seeking to display our good works or our diligence in prayer before others; being firm in our determination not to be led into temptation; and so on. Today's second reading also, from St. Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, reminds us of the sacrificial nature of the Christian life; Paul describes our lives as a 'living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship' (words which we repeat in the prayer of thanksgiving after communion, as we prepare to leave Church and resume our lives in the outside world). Similarly, he urges us not to conform to the 'ways of the world' but to let God renew our minds so that we become transformed in such a way as to know more fully what is the will and purpose of God for us, and what is good and acceptable and perfect in God's eyes.

So let's take encouragement from these and similar texts, especially when the journey is hard and we feel that our life of discipleship is not really going anywhere. They do not offer what the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace' - forgiveness without conditions - but show us the way to the new life which God wants for all of us. They show us the way to true repentance and to building a firm basis for our spiritual lives.

Of course we will fall and fail again; but the meaning of God's enduring love is that he always offers us the way back to him. For he has given us - and keeps giving us - the building blocks with which we can continue to build, day after day, year after year, that firm spiritual foundation, rooted in Christ, which will enable us to withstand all the various buffets and the blows of life; until that time when our work on earth is done and the joys of heaven open up before us. Amen.