

Love so amazing, so Divine ...

... Demands my Soul, my Life, my All

A sermon given on the Twelfth Sunday of Trinity, 30th August 2020, by the Revd Tim Kelly, in the Minster.

Matthew 16:21-end

To start with this morning, I'd like to run a few thoughts by you: McDonald's, possibly offers some of the world's finest cuisine; Stephen Hawking, not really a very clever man; and the song Baby Shark is a masterpiece of musical brilliance! Hmmm, it sounds like there's something a bit odd, something altogether wrong in my thinking, doesn't it? Some of those statements are quite topsy turvy or inside out. At the very least, they sound counter to conventional thinking. Now, that may have been obvious to you, but in today's gospel passage, some of Jesus's statements would have appeared equally odd, equally shocking, equally disturbing to Peter and the disciples.

When Jesus tells his disciples what is about to happen next as they journey towards Jerusalem, about how he must undergo great suffering, they would be confused and baffled. This is not at all what they were expecting. In the verses just before today's passage, Peter has just declared and realised that Jesus is the Messiah, not just some prophet. Having had that confirmed by Jesus, he must have thought that he had the future all planned out: despite there being some clues to the contrary in the Old Testament, he was probably thinking, 'Right. The Messiah has come. We will form an army, we will overthrow the oppressive regime and free the land of Israel.' And of course, he'd be in the front line, having just been appointed as the rock upon which Jesus's church was to be built. But Jesus's words knocked all of those plans and those thoughts for six: to those listening, what Jesus was describing sounded almost like the exact opposite - the wrong way round. Jesus declares, 'Yes, the kingdom of God is coming and the battle is being fought, but in terms of the rulers and the kings and the authorities, it was they that would appear to win the battle.'

Peter's suggestion to Jesus that there must be an easier way, a way around, a way that could avoid this suffering, receives one of Jesus's most harsh rebukes, "Get behind me, Satan" as if Jesus is being tempted again like he was in the desert. But Jesus could also be saying, 'Get behind me, get back into the position of the apprentice following the rabbi. Don't try to lead me. Watch and learn how I will lead you.'

Now during lockdown I know that several of us have had some moments attempting home haircuts, following YouTube videos, plucking up the courage to let spouses have a go with some scissors or some clippers. But did anybody try to cut their own hair in a mirror? I must admit that I did have a go with some clippers. But it's hard, isn't it? You just spot somewhere where you think you need to cut a bit that needs a little trim or isn't level, and then you reach for it and then you realise you're reaching for the wrong side. It's all too easy to get it wrong. It's surprisingly difficult. And that's a little bit like what's going on in this passage as Jesus begins to tell what it means to be one of his disciples. It seems like it's 'inside-out' and 'wrong way round' thinking. If you've ever read Lewis Carroll's 'Alice through the Looking Glass', he describes a world where strangely, you don't get to your destination by walking towards it, but by walking away from it. Similarly, Jesus speaks to the disciples and today tells us, 'To be my disciple will cost you everything.' It isn't a sideline or a hobby. It demands a complete 'flipping', a complete re-orientation of our focus and our attention. It demands our all- but in return we gain all: it costs everything, but we gain everything.

Now, that would have been difficult to absorb and to be honest, it's hard for us to absorb today. It's not easy to see this picture in the mirror, as it says, in 1 Corinthians, 13:12 - *'For now, we see in the mirror dimly or in a mirror strangely, but then we will see face to face.'*

Now naturally, there is a tendency for us to 'hedge our bets': to live our lives with half of our intellectual and emotional investment in one place and half in another, just in case. But Jesus is telling us that that's not what he wants of us - for those who want to save their life will lose it.

I am an Indiana Jones fan, and I remember a scene towards the end of the third film where one of the key female characters is hanging on the edge of a precipice and Indiana Jones is reaching down, grabs her hand and is ready to pull her up. But the problem is that tantalisingly close, looking just down there to the treasure that they've been searching for, she can see it, and she can just almost reach it with her hand. She wants both. As she reaches, wriggles, to try and reach with the other hand towards the treasure, she falls to her death. Indiana Jones then slips and suddenly he's in the same place as she was, hanging on the edge of the precipice. And now his father is above him, holding his hand, wanting to pull him up. But that treasure is still just down there, just out of reach. And his father calls upon him, "You've got to let the treasure go, Indiana." And he does, and his father is able to pull him up.

Jesus's words were challenging them, and they continue to challenge us today. What are those things that we reach for and strive after, and what are the things that we are prepared to let go? What are those things onto which we should be holding tight? As we think on these questions, Jesus invites us to walk with him and embrace the sometimes 'upside down', 'inside out' nature of the Kingdom of God.

I want to end with some poetic words from Isaac Watt's famous hymn 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross' that capture some of this.

*My richest Gain I count but Loss,
And pour Contempt on all my Pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the Death of Christ my God:
All the vain Things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his Blood.*

*Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,
That were a Present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All*

Amen.

Reading Text

Matthew 16:21-end

²¹ 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 ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ 'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'